



## Education Committee

### Oral evidence: [The Work of the Department for Education, HC 540](#)

Wednesday 15 January 2025

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Dr Caroline Johnson; Amanda Martin; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Swards; Patrick Spencer; Caroline Voaden.

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#### Witnesses

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

#### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP and Susan Acland-Hood.

Q1 **Chair:** We now begin the public proceedings of the Education Committee in our accountability hearing with the Secretary of State for Education and the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education. Welcome to our Committee this morning. Secretary of State, I believe that you would like to give a couple of minutes of introduction. I encourage Members and our witnesses to be succinct in their questioning and answers. We have a great deal to get through and we have a hard stop of about 11.45 to enable Members to get to Prime Minister's questions. You are very welcome. Over to you, Secretary of State.

**Bridget Phillipson:** Thank you very much, Chair, and I will endeavour to do that this morning.

I am delighted to be here today and I want to say before I go further how proud I am to be in front of you. There is no job better in government and no better Select Committee to sit on. I want to thank you, Chair, for the early opportunity to update members of the Committee on the work and thinking of the Department for Education.

The Government believe that education belongs at the heart of national life, at the heart of the ambition that we have for the next generation. I know how a great education and the support of loving families and



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parents can transform lives. My ambition and determination is to improve standards at every stage of children's education. I believe that is the way we will drive the best possible outcomes for all, breaking the link between background and success. That starts in our children's earliest years and our plan for change sets the ambition for a record proportion of children starting school ready to learn. This step is essential to every child's success.

Turning to schools, over the past few decades we saw improved attainment before the pandemic but all was not well in our school system: a third of children were leaving primary school without all the fundamental reading, writing and maths skills; disadvantaged children were too often being failed; and children with SEND were left without the support they needed to excel at school. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated those problems and recovery has been too slow. Average attainment is down, the gap for disadvantaged children has opened up, and we have an absence crisis with more than one in five children missing a day at school each fortnight, fuelled by fewer and fewer children feeling that they belong at school. This needs to change.

Our mission is to drive high and rising standards and academies are crucial partners and often leaders in this. High standards must be the right of every child, delivered through excellent teaching and leadership, a shared knowledge-rich and engaging curriculum and a system that removes the barriers to learning that hold back too many of our children. This means higher and broader expectations for all children and of all schools, and that truly means for all children.

We are designing a school system that supports and challenges all schools to deliver high standards for every child, expert qualified teachers in every classroom, teaching a rich and broad curriculum, with schools able to create an attractive pay and conditions offer that attracts and retains the staff our children need. We will create a floor but no ceiling, enabling healthy competition and innovation to improve all schools, but effective competition alone is not sufficient.

There are still too many struggling schools that are not providing a good education, with a fragmented system that lets vulnerable children fall through the gaps, and we will tackle this. Our accountability reforms will replace blunt single-word judgments with more information on what schools do well and what they need to do to improve. Our new RISE teams will work with schools that are struggling or slipping. We will continue to change the leadership and governance of schools where there is not capacity to drive the change that is needed.

We are taking action to make sure that parents, wherever they live, will have a good local school for their child and can be confident they will achieve and thrive, but learning must not end when young people leave school. We are going further to create new pathways for young people and adults to learn, retrain and upskill throughout their lives, spreading



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growth and economic opportunity to every corner of our country. I look forward to discussing this and all issues with you this morning.

**Q2 Chair:** Thank you very much. We will start with some questions on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is a hugely significant piece of legislation, a very large Bill. I want to ask first about the unique identifier for children, which is a critical measure at the heart of the Bill and a lot hangs on its implementation. Can you say how the unique identifier for children will be integrated with existing databases and information systems? How will you ensure that data accuracy and privacy is maintained during the implementation?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes, of course, and those are the right questions to be asking. I know that people want to be confident about data security and how this will work with appropriate secure governance. That is why through the pilot areas that we will be bringing on board we will make sure we can test all this and ensure that information is being shared in a way that is completely appropriate, as set out in the legislation.

Slightly going back a step, this is something that has been called for for a very long time, including by children's charities and the Children's Commissioner, because as things stand there is a lot of information out there in the world about children but when we bring it together we can have a much clearer sense about what is going on in a child's life. I think that is especially important for our most vulnerable children. We know from all the work that has gone on over many years, the serious case reviews, that sometimes the feeling is that agencies are not sharing the information that is known about a child's life. Only through putting that information together can we really make sure that we are putting in place the action that is needed to protect children and to keep them safe.

**Q3 Chair:** Do you have a timeline in mind for the implementation of the unique child identifier?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The intention is to bring pilot areas on board by April 2025, and to start that process then through that testing. In understanding that we have the design and the information sharing in the right place, we can look to a timeline for how we take it forward.

**Q4 Chair:** Thank you. I will ask now about profiteering by children's home providers. We have heard from a range of different witnesses some concerns not about principle so much as the delicacy of the implementation and the need to ensure that local authorities have ample opportunity to transition to different types of provision so that there is not a collapse in the provision of children's home places. How will you ensure that in implementing a cap on profits you don't inadvertently cause a collapse in the provision of places for vulnerable children?

**Bridget Phillipson:** That tension is at the heart of the approach that we are taking in seeking to make sure that we shift the system but alongside that we don't further destabilise what I appreciate is quite a difficult situation for lots of children and young people at the moment. The



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legislation brings in the ability to set the profit cap. We will consult further on the shape of that but the message to providers is clear, that we think excess profiteering has no place within the system. We want to work with local authorities and others to put in place the capacity and the places that are required to ensure that where children's social care placement is the last resort, the only option for a young person going through the system, that there is high-quality, good local provision available.

That is why alongside the measures that we are setting out for the introduction of the profit cap, we are doing more on kinship care and fostering and early support, too. I believe that there is so much more we could do to put in place earlier and timely support for parents and children to stop problems escalating, but where social care placement is required, it should be of the highest quality. We need to act on the excess profiteering in the system but that has to involve market shaping alongside it to make sure that we are creating the provision that is required.

**Q5 Chair:** Are you looking at the provision of transformation funding for local authorities to enable them to deliver, whether that is in-house provision, or working with trusted providers who are not profiteering, to make sure that the places are available?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes, and I have seen some fantastic examples of local councils doing precisely that across the country. We invested more capital into it through the Budget, but I appreciate that we will need to do more over time alongside this legislation to get the balance right within the system of care for children.

**Q6 Caroline Voaden:** Nearly half a million children are missing out on free school meals that they are eligible for. We know that that means that many schools are missing out on thousands of pounds of pupil premium funding that they could get. Can you tell us what the reasons are for not including auto-enrolment of eligible children in free school meals in the Bill?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We continue to look very carefully at this right across government with other colleagues. As you will know, we set out in the Bill the process of rolling out breakfast clubs in all primary schools. I believe it is important that children get a great start to the day. I understand the arguments that are made about auto-enrolment and we continue to look carefully at that.

**Q7 Caroline Voaden:** We can see it has been successful in many councils. Is there a timeline—you are looking at it, but what does that mean?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I can't give you a timeline on it. What we are doing at pace, as you will know, is starting the process of rolling out breakfast clubs in primary schools. The early adopter scheme will come on board this year, which will start to make a big difference to children's lives.



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Q8 **Caroline Voaden:** Yes, we know about breakfast clubs but I was asking you about free school meals auto-enrolment. Is there any plan to roll that out?

**Bridget Phillipson:** As I say, we continue to keep this area under review.

Q9 **Mark Swards:** Thanks for your answers so far. I welcome the creation of registers of children not in school. What projections, if any, has your Department made on the costs that local authorities might incur as a result of the creation of these registers?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are mindful of the challenges that local councils are under at the moment. That is why through the Budget we invested record levels of funding into councils to make sure that they have more resources, particularly in targeted areas like this. All the measures that we have set out through the Bill have been cleared by Treasury and are consistent with our baseline.

On the point about children not on school registers and why we believe this is such an important measure—and this goes back to the discussion about the single unique identifier—there are too many children for whom we don't have visibility of what is going on in their lives. We need to know where children are. Alongside that, there are measures in the legislation about ensuring that where there are serious concerns about safeguarding, where section 47 investigations are under way, we require parents to seek the consent of local councils so we can be confident that we are protecting children's best interests.

Q10 **Mark Swards:** In addition to that, I know that your Department and you have no problem with parents who choose to home school their children. That is not what this is about. It is about keeping children safe. I have met with home schoolers in my constituency and they have concerns about the security of the data. What reassurances can you give them that this data will not be able to be accessed by anyone and what will happen to it after they stop being children?

**Bridget Phillipson:** To be clear to your constituents and to other parents who choose to home educate their children, if they are doing so to a good standard and they have their children's best interests at heart, as I am sure they do, they have nothing to be concerned about in the measures that we are setting out. This is about making sure that where there are concerns about a child's welfare, we are making clear that we want to know where children are. We will ensure alongside that there are clear safeguards around data sharing and information. Local councils are aware of their duties under various legislation already in place. There will be a responsibility to follow that through. That includes, for example, provisions for how long data and information is held, which would be the case across all aspects of information and data control.

Q11 **Mark Swards:** Will there be any guidance about how to standardise this process across all local authorities so that you do not end up with



hundreds of local authorities taking different approaches to data collection?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We will make sure that councils have the clarity, the understanding and the consistency so that we have a clear and uniform approach across the country.

Q12 **Jess Asato:** Thank you, Secretary of State. The Bill strengthens Ofsted's powers to investigate unregistered and, therefore, illegal schools. Last week Ofsted officials largely welcomed the changes but said that they looked forward to conversations about unregistered alternative provision, which "does not get as great a mention in the Bill". Why is unregistered alternative provision not included in the same way as unregistered schools?

**Bridget Phillipson:** As you say, we are taking action through the Bill that we have discussed with Ofsted to make sure that it has the powers that it needs. I looked carefully at what Ofsted said to the Committee and I have regular conversations with Ofsted about the powers that it requires. We won't hesitate to go further to make sure that Ofsted is able to intervene to make sure that children are kept safe. That is a conversation we continue to have with Ofsted, but of course there are always limitations to just how much you can bring forward at one go.

Q13 **Jess Asato:** You mentioned the important need to tackle profiteering. One of the measures that the Bill introduces is an expansion of regional care co-operatives. Could you explain the evidence that sits behind the decision to expand the regional care co-operatives when similar regionalisation arrangements for adoption agencies have not increased adoption places significantly?

**Bridget Phillipson:** On the latter point, the picture is slightly mixed and a bit nuanced in some of the evidence. I have some good examples where collaboration between local authorities on fostering has been more effective in providing a clear one-stop shop for those who wish to become foster carers to know where to go rather than having to contact lots of different agencies and those responsible.

On the regional care co-operatives, I think there is a strong evidence base behind councils working together more effectively on provision within their areas. Often the quirks of geography can mean that you end up with some perverse consequences where councils do not collaborate and work together. The long-term intention of the policy change overall is that we will see fewer children having to go into formal placements through children's social care, through the changes that we drive for kinship and fostering. Alongside that, where it is necessary for children to require placement within children's residential care, for example, that they are much closer to home. I have seen far too many examples of children being sent the length and breadth of the country, far away from family and friends and support networks, having to leave education provision.



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The outcomes, as you will all know, for children going through the children's social care system are, quite frankly, a national scandal. That is why we are taking early action to put in place the support that is needed for some of the most vulnerable children in our society who too often don't have a voice and whose needs have been overlooked and forgotten for far too long.

- Q14 **Jess Asato:** Given the horrific murder of Sara Sharif and recent calls by the Children's Commissioner and children's organisations to equalise protection for children, as is the case in Scotland and Wales, do you think it is now time to introduce this protective measure, particularly as we have the children's wellbeing Bill in front of us?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I understand the arguments and the case that is made for it. I have discussed it directly with the Children's Commissioner and others. It is an area that we will continue to keep under review. I want to look at the evidence that emerges from Wales and Scotland, but we have to be absolutely clear that children must be kept safe from harm, that parents have responsibilities. The changes that we want to put in place are about ensuring that problems do not escalate and that families get the early and timely support that they need, but we don't intend to bring forward any changes in the way that you have described.

- Q15 **Patrick Spencer:** Thanks very much, Secretary of State. I want to ask a question about clause 45 and the extension of statutory pay and condition arrangements for teachers in academies. As briefly as you can, what was the thinking behind the decision to tighten rules on pay for teachers in academy schools?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We want a solid floor for all teachers working across the profession, with clear expectations about what it means to be a teacher so that every school has the freedom to innovate and go beyond. It has become clear to me that there has been some confusion and some worry about what I have said in this area, so today I want to be absolutely clear that all schools will have full flexibility to innovate with a floor and no ceiling on what that means.

We all know the challenges that schools across the country are facing at the moment with recruitment and retention. I want the innovation, flexibility and excellence, much of which we have seen in the academy system, to be available to all schools. They do brilliant work, especially with some of the changes that we will need to see to make teaching a more attractive place, especially for those seeking to combine work and family life, not least because what troubles me is that we see growing numbers of women, particularly in their 30s, after having had children, deciding that they find it too hard to combine being a teacher and being a parent.

- Q16 **Patrick Spencer:** On what you have said about schools having flexibility to pay a teacher more than what the STRB recommends outside of the band, will that be the case?



**Bridget Phillipson:** A floor and no ceiling.

Q17 **Patrick Spencer:** Okay. What is the intention? Is there a lot of evidence that teachers are paid significantly below in academies? I am interested in why there is the inclusion of this clause. Is there any evidence that headteachers pay teachers less than they would do otherwise if they were bound by the STRB?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I think it is a combination of how we want to approach the wider package of being a teacher. It is about pay and conditions together, not just one or the other. Lots of what I hear from teachers across the country is that there have been challenges with pay, although we delivered the 5.5% pay award for teachers out of the last STRB process. Some of the biggest challenges are around flexibility and how we make teaching an attractive place for our best graduates. I have seen some great work, including within academies, driven by fantastic leaders that has allowed innovation and flexibility. However, I want that innovation and flexibility to be available to all schools regardless of type.

Q18 **Darren Paffey:** Good morning, Secretary of State. One of the biggest, if not the biggest, issues facing families, children and professionals is special educational needs and disability and how we best care for and get the best for those children. You have set the direction of travel as inclusivity in mainstream and as the first downpayment of that we have seen £740 million of capital investment. What follows that? What are the next priorities for improving inclusivity in mainstream?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I think right across the House—and right across our country when you speak to parents and schools and others—there is a recognition that the system that we have at the moment is not delivering the good outcomes that we want for children with SEND, where parents have increasingly lost confidence and councils are increasingly being pushed to the brink.

We invested more in this through the Budget and I will return to that, but precisely on the question of inclusivity in mainstream, we have set up work within the Department. I have brought in Tom Rees, who leads a large academy chain and does fantastic work in this area, to give us early advice on the short and medium-term changes that we can make in the system to drive more inclusivity in mainstream. I need to be clear that I think the reform that is required goes beyond that with the scale of what we face with the challenges that families and children are experiencing at the moment. That is why there is much more that we need to do in creating specialist provision for children within mainstream. I have seen some fantastic examples across the country that have been against the grain of previous government policy rather than in line with government policy.

We will be setting out more this year on the direction of travel—through the Budget an extra £1 billion going in to support children with SEND, and additional investment in capital—but this is a complex and





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challenging area in the longer-term reform that I believe is required. It will require us all to think differently about the system and support that we want for all children. I believe that children with SEND have been forgotten for far too long. That is why one of the first things that I did on becoming Secretary of State was to restructure the Department to put SEND right at the heart of what we do around school life. If we want all children to succeed and excel at school, that has to extend to children with SEND as well.

**Q19 Darren Paffey:** This Committee heard from Sir Martyn Oliver of Ofsted last week that it intends to bring in measures to look at what inclusivity means and make its judgments partly based on that. It will need a framework from the Department so that it knows what it is looking for. What is your intention for how you monitor and measure progress of whether or not schools are becoming more inclusive?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We will be saying more about that very soon on the new Ofsted report cards and the approach that we take from the Department on accountability, but I think a lot more needs to happen on inclusivity. I am also very alive to what I hear, and I am sure you all hear, from teachers and school staff across the country about how they often feel ill equipped to support children with a growing range of needs. There is much more around training and development of our workforce—support staff as well as teaching staff—to drive more inclusion.

I also want to be clear that we need to protect and maintain provision of good places in the specialist sector for children whose needs cannot be met within mainstream provision. That will always be the case. There is also amazing work across the specialist sector and I think there is lots that they can show us and help us with on what that could look like in mainstream as well.

**Q20 Chair:** Just quickly on capital funding, are you looking at the specification for new school buildings and school refurbishments to make sure that that is an inclusive specification and that there will not be school buildings that are built in the future that need to be retrofitted to make sure that they can accommodate the broadest possible range of children's needs?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes, through the wider capital programme of the Department and alongside that the additional investment that we intend to put into creating more specialist provision. We might come on to this point but there is a wider demographic shift taking place across the country, first here in London but seemingly elsewhere, that will mean we have spare capacity in many of our schools. There is a question as to how we use that space more imaginatively to allow for children wherever possible to be able to go to their local school, because that is what lots of parents tell me they want. They want great provision for their child but they would love that provision to be much closer to home.

**Q21 Mark Sewards:** As somebody who was teaching on this day a year ago,



I know just how creative teachers can get when it comes to approaches towards children with SEND and how to make them feel included, especially in mainstream settings. Some have suggested that the best way to improve inclusivity in mainstream settings is to legislate for it, to put it on a statutory footing. Is that something your Department would consider and, if not, why not?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are looking at whether legislation might be required as part of any reforms that we intend to bring forward and we believe that we would have the time available to us should that be required. If I may, I think that slightly gets ahead of the thinking that we have under way in the Department. We need to take a step back from the system that we have inherited, a system that I believe has been neglected for far too long, where children have been failed, where we have had high expectations for some children but not all children, and that has to shift.

I believe that we need to think differently about where we are and where we need to get to so that all children can achieve and thrive and we recognise, as we see a larger number of children in mainstream settings who have additional needs, that that becomes much more responsive and that teachers in particular—as you describe—have the tools, the training and the development that they need. I hear a lot of the time that lots of teachers feel that they don't have it and there is a more complex cohort of young people than might have been the case previously.

Q22 **Mark Swards:** That is definitely the case. You talked there about having to take a step back and look at the entire system, not trying to get ahead of ourselves. Has your Department looked at any alternative systems? Have you looked at other countries to see what works there? Is there anything that you are considering implementing from those other nations?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes, we have. I will return to that in one moment. I appreciate that the Committee has work under way in this area. We look forward to seeing the work that arises from the Committee and understanding what you might be able to share by way of approach and recommendation as part of that. I will turn to you, Permanent Secretary, on the international evidence point.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** Thank you very much. Yes, we have looked at international examples. I know that the Chair has been quite interested in examples like Ontario and that is one of the places we have looked at. We have also looked at the Irish system, particularly the systems where there is successful work to support mainstream integration, because that delivers better results for children and not only just children with special educational needs. One of things people sometimes worry about is that if you provide more inclusive education for children with special educational needs, might you drag down the experience of other children? When you look at it, the international evidence suggests the opposite, that it is better for all children if you can provide better, more inclusive education.



The other thing we have been doing is using the evidence base and working very closely with health partners on programmes that help to support teachers in their teaching. I will pick out three programmes that I think are very relevant. The Committee will know that the fastest growing areas of need are speech and language, social, emotional and mental health need and ASD.

We have worked with the Department of Health on a programme called partnerships for inclusion of neurodiversity in schools, the PINS programme. That deploys specialists from the health and educational workforces to train school staff and give them high-quality resources and will have worked with about 10% of mainstream primary schools by March 2025. It is early days but the results from that programme look promising and that is the approach we would like to roll out further.

We also have the Nuffield early language intervention, NELI, one of my favourite education acronyms, which is focused on improving the speech and language skills of children aged between four and five. That has worked with over 200,000 children. It has screened over 640,000 children and then worked with 200,000. The evaluation of NELI shows that it has improved the development of oral language by four months for pupils receiving intervention and by seven months for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The third programme I pick out is ELSEC, early language and speech for every child, which is looking at different workforce models to support the early identification of children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in the early years in primary school. It is trying to start early, identify early and put positive interventions in place.

We are looking internationally but we are also looking domestically at how we grow and spread best evidence on the approaches that work.

**Q23** **Manuela Perteghella:** In rural areas in particular, you may have mainstream schools with very high-quality provision but they are struggling to recruit and retain teaching assistants, for example, who obviously support the work with SEND pupils. Are you thinking about how you could look at a career path for teaching assistants, with continuous professional development to make the job attractive for the people who come and support SEND pupils in schools?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes. This is about the whole workforce, so that extends to our teaching assistants and support staff as well as to our teachers. It is why we are legislating to restore the school support staff negotiating body to make sure that everyone in our workforce is properly supported. Alongside that, one of the interventions that the Permanent Secretary was talking about, the Nuffield early language intervention, will be delivered through teaching assistants and support staff. There is a challenge in making sure that the people who do so much of this work have the training and professional development that they need. There is also a question around routes into teaching for support staff, for teaching



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assistants who might wish to consider that as well. We are looking carefully at it but it is around those career pathways, the onward progression.

Alongside that, I do think it is about the teacher direction and integration of those two approaches, so having teachers who are expert in how they can deliver interventions for children with SEND but supported by the workforce who, again, feel valued and respected for the work that they do. It is why such an important part of what we have sought to do since the formation of this Government is to make clear that reset between government and the workforce, because in everything that we are talking about today about life chances for children, about high standards in our schools and about breaking that link between background and success, we know that the quality of teaching in particular is the single biggest way that we can make that shift.

**Q24** **Amanda Martin:** In 2020 there was the introduction of the statutory override but, despite that, in 2022 and 2023 there were 101 overspent local authorities on their high needs budget. It has contributed to the cumulative deficit in the Dedicated Schools Grants, or DSGs. Many local authorities are concerned about their economic viability after the statutory override comes to an end in March 2026 and would like clarity about whether the override will be extended or what will happen if that is not the case. The question is on that, but also why has there been a delay in the decision making and when can local authorities expect an answer?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I do recognise the pressures that councils across our country face—pressures around children’s social care, around support for children with SEND, and much more. We do recognise that strain. As part of the local government finance settlement in December, the Government set out plans for making reform. There is more that we need to do. I cannot give you a timeline at this point as to when we might be able to say more, but we do appreciate the need to put local authorities on a more sustainable footing and to consider the statutory override as a part of that. We will continue to work with councils to keep the sector updated as much as we can do as quickly as we can.

**Q25** **Chair:** To press you on that, the Public Accounts Committee report that was published overnight calls for the Government to decide what to do about the statutory override no later than March this year. In light of the fact that local authorities are required by law to set balanced budgets, they must do that in light of the context at the time and not in speculation about what might happen in the future. They will be setting budgets with a view to making significant redundancies over the coming year if there is no clarity about what happens at the end of the financial year. Can I press you again on when local authorities, who are in desperate straits at the moment on this issue, will have clarity about what the Government intend to do?



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**Bridget Phillipson:** I completely recognise the challenge and the urgency. We are working across government. This is not something that we alone can do. It is an across government consideration, but the inheritance that we have is one where councils face incredible financial difficulties. I understand that. Across government there are significant fiscal challenges arising out of the inheritance that we have as a Government. I do not know if there is anything Susan can add by way of timing.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** We recognise that timing and the urgency for councils in setting budgets and we are working closely with MHCLG and the Treasury and will do this as quickly as we possibly can.

Q26 **Patrick Spencer:** Unfortunately, my question has already been answered by Susan about programmes that can be implemented within a school setting to support children with SEND. My follow-up would have been: why are we still trialling programmes? The evidence on NELI has been well established for years. Why has it not been rolled out universally across schools? Is there not a capital allocation issue here where we are spending a lot of money on capital and buildings and boosting inclusivity when money would be better spent on rolling out programmes with a good evidence base?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are rolling out NELI across primary schools, but I would say much of what you just said there I recognise. I would probably direct you to ask previous Ministers why they did not do enough in this space, because they did not.

Q27 **Patrick Spencer:** Everything you have come forward with so far has been talking generally about capital investment. You are saying you are rolling these things out but you have not really made significant announcements. There is no inclusion within the children's wellbeing Bill that there is going to be a massive investment in programme delivery at the grassroots. Are we just going to leave it there or are you going to come forward with more spending commitments in the near future?

**Bridget Phillipson:** There are areas where primary legislation is required and I think an area where we do need to take action is around issues on admissions, which will help in this space as well. What you are describing—and I agree that there needs to be more support for children with SEND—does not require primary legislation. That is why we are rolling out the NELI scheme. It is why we are rolling out more support for teachers. It is why we are working with colleagues in health on the short and medium-term changes that we absolutely do need to make in the system.

I am afraid I do not believe that just tinkering around the edges of some of this will be adequate given the scale of what we face, but I do have to set this out very clearly. The inheritance in terms of not just the fiscal challenge—which I think, frankly, is second order because this is about children's life chances—is shocking. We have let down so many children



and families in our country: the families who have lost confidence in the system, the children who are not getting the outcomes that they deserve. Nothing is off the table in terms of what we consider around what reform will look like but, yes, in the here and now we are rolling out NELI. Speech and language support is a crucial area, I agree, and if we can do more to get involved in children's lives where they face early speech and language difficulties, not only can we start to turn that around but we also free up provision for children's needs that are more complex.

**Q28 Caroline Voaden:** Secretary of State, what impact assessment has been made by the Department on the impact of VAT on private schools for families who choose to send their child to a private school that is not named in a child's EHC plan?

**Bridget Phillipson:** As part of the changes that we set out with Treasury in the Budget and Treasury leading on the change where it comes to taxation changes, there was a full impact assessment. We did consider the needs of children with SEND. It is why as a part of that process where pupils require places arising out of an EHCP where that need has been defined there will not be any additional costs as a part of that.

Of course, parents in addition are free to choose where they educate their children, whether that is in a private school or within a state school, but the line that we have drawn is that where that will apply is for children who have an education health and care plan.

**Q29 Caroline Voaden:** Many families are waiting a year or more for a plan and are choosing to put their child in a private setting so that they can get some education in the meantime. There has been no impact assessment done on parents who just make that decision without having the plan in place. Is that correct?

**Bridget Phillipson:** No, all this has been considered as part of the measures that we have set out. What I would add is that I do recognise that some parents will make choices around a private school if that is what they feel is in their child's best interests. It demonstrates the urgency of the change that we need to drive across the system. However, that is beyond the means of the vast majority of parents in our country. The vast majority of children in our country go to state schools. That is why I am so focused on driving up standards across our state system for all children and that does extend to children with SEND as well.

**Q30 Caroline Voaden:** What impact assessment has been made about the impact of the VAT on private schools on the SEND capacity in state schools if those children are then removed from private schools and put into the state system?

**Bridget Phillipson:** As part of the process through the Budget around the changes that we are setting out, we have looked at all the potential impacts, including on the schools themselves, and on the potential for movement for children, but I am afraid we do have to be clear that where that is through an identified need, where it has been defined that a child



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requires a place within a specialist provision because their needs cannot be met elsewhere, there will be no additional costs. Parents will be free to make a choice as to whether they elect for a private school for their child if they believe that is in their child's best interests. I recognise that. Parents are free to make that decision. I just do not believe that in what is a very constrained fiscal environment that we can continue to provide tax breaks in that way.

**Q31 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you, Secretary of State. I should say I have three children who are at independent schools.

In the explanatory notes for the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill it says the primary aim is that the educational system should be more consistent, which is interesting because "consistent" can be consistently good as well as consistently bad. Certainly, consistency has been achieved so far by the Government taking away the Latin Excellence Programme delivering Latin to children in a range of schools, by cancelling the computer hubs that offer children an opportunity to go to a school that specialises in teaching computers and provides excellence in teaching in those areas, and by cancelling the language hubs and defunding those as well. I can see how that improves consistency, but can the Secretary of State explain how that improves excellence and the floor with no ceiling?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I will come on to the point on excellence because that is at the core of what I believe. We have had to make some very difficult decisions about what we can and cannot continue to fund. That was sadly because of the legacy of the previous Government. To give a further example, we did seek to prioritise, for example, a pay award for teachers because we know that the quality of teaching is the single biggest way that we can make a difference to children's life chances. The last Government unfortunately received that report and made no provision as to how they were going to pay for it. We have had to make difficult choices, none of which are easy.

Alongside that, I believe that excellence should be for every child in every school in every corner of our country. That is not currently the situation that we have. Far too many children, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds, are being terribly let down by a system that is just not delivering the excellence that they deserve. What parents across the country want is a clear set of expectations around what all schools will be required to deliver. It is why, for example, I believe that the national curriculum should apply in all schools. That, after all, was a Conservative achievement, to deliver a core set of expectations, a floor, but where schools should, can, and will go beyond it to give a brilliant education for all children.

I saw in my own childhood what happens when schools fail children. I was very fortunate. I also had a loving family who valued education, but for lots of the kids I grew up with in the north-east in the 1980s and 1990s, working class kids whose families were really struggling, they



were terribly let down by a system that was just not working. It was some of those changes, whether it was around the national curriculum, whether it was around assessment in primary school—

**Q32 Dr Caroline Johnson:** If I could interrupt the Secretary of State to come back to the question, I also grew up in the 1980s and 1990s in the north-east of England as she did and went to a state comprehensive school until 16, so I understand the system as it was then. That is a long time ago. What I am interested in now is how cancelling these programmes in Latin, computer science and languages is going to improve excellence for teaching in particularly the children who were receiving those programmes.

**Bridget Phillipson:** Again, I do have to return to the point that I made at the start around the tough choices that we have had to make that we do not want to make, but I am afraid that was the inheritance from the last Government.

To return to the point around what excellence and consistency means in that context, this is about innovation for me. It is about excellence. It is around those core sets of expectations where there has been agreement over a very long time as to what is required, whether that is around curriculum, around firm and clear accountability and around making sure that we have a good sense of what a child is or is not achieving within school. That is how we drive up standards alongside a brilliant and supported workforce.

On the specific point around, for example, Latin Excellence, that scheme sadly was due to conclude later this year. We are working closely with the Centre for Latin Excellence to ensure that schools involved in the programme will have access to the resources that they need to continue to deliver the programme. As someone again who went to a state school in the 1990s, we were taught Latin. This should not be the preserve of just those in private schools. I agree with that. I want all schools to be able to offer a broad and rich curriculum, including through a range of subjects. That is the focus and the determination not just of the legislation that we are setting out but also the prioritisation of spending within the Department, which is challenging but we are focusing on driving up standards through investment in regional improvement teams, for example, and much more besides.

**Q33 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you, Secretary of State. I also learnt Latin at a state school to GCSE in the north-east of England, so we have more in common than we think.

I wanted to ask you about the effects of the VAT. We have heard about children having to move schools, including some children having to move schools during their GCSE or A-level year. We have heard about the closure of some schools and the unemployment of staff and the contracts provided to them. We have heard of some children who, having had to leave a school because their parents can no longer afford it, are





struggling to find a school place with the disruption to education as a result. Does that worry you, Secretary of State?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I want all parents to make choices about what is right for their children. As you will know, the vast majority of parents elect to send their children to a state school. That is a decision but it is also a conscious decision. I think our state schools do amazing work but it is also a reflection of the fact that for lots of parents a private education is just way beyond their means. The average of £18,000 a year I am afraid is—I will return to your questions—way beyond the means of most of the people I represent and I suspect most of the people on this Committee. I understand the questions around impact on children and young people. That is why in the assessment that is set out, both the assessment ahead of the election but also the assessment that has been undertaken by Treasury subsequently, we believe the impact to be minimal.

Of course, private schools are private institutions that can set their own levels of fee. They can make decisions about how they manage their budgets, how all this stacks together. I would hope and expect that schools in those situations would be seeking to bear down on costs to parents to ensure that they are available to the communities that they wish to serve. Their fees have gone up year on year way beyond inflation and they have, frankly, priced themselves out of the market for a lot of middle-class parents.

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** I am not sure that answered the question, Chair, which was—

**Chair:** I think the Secretary of State has said what she is going to say. We are going to move on.

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** I am not sure she has answered the question.

**Chair:** We are going to move on to Sureena.

Q34 **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** Last week we met with Ofsted's Chief Inspector about reforms, particularly moving from single word judgments to a new style report card system. How confident are you that the new report card system will not simply repeat the same high stakes system?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The intention of moving away from the single headline grades and moving to a report card system has two purposes. First, to ensure that we have a much clearer sense as to what is going on within a school, what is working and what is not, with a sharp focus on the change that is required to drive up standards. Alongside that, to ensure that parents have a clear sense of what is going on within their child's school at the moment. As a parent, if you were to read a report you do not always get a clear sense of what is happening and the change that is required.

I should be clear to the Committee that this will not be an easier system for schools. It will be a clearer, firmer process that I think will give a



much sharper focus on how we can ensure that schools are driving up standards across the system.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** I was just going to amplify that and say it is a high stakes system. It should be a high stakes system because it is high stakes for children. The work that we have been doing in the Department that has been led by Ministers and Ofsted has been on the basis that we want a system that is higher information, more granular, more precise and more rigorous, not that it should be lower stakes.

Q35 **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** We were also told by the Chief Inspector that an annual Ofsted safeguarding visit to every school would cost £45 million a year. Will Ofsted lead the annual safeguarding reviews and, if so, what will be the financial implications for Ofsted?

**Bridget Phillipson:** In part it depends on what that safeguarding review would consider and how big in school it would be. Those conversations are under way at the moment as to the shape of that and what is required. I do think it is important that we more regularly have a sense of these important issues around, for example, attendance, off-rolling and wider issues of safeguarding within our schools.

To return to the prior point around the purpose and nature of inspection, accountability and what it is for, I think we all would want to have absolute confidence that problems and issues are identified as quickly as possible. The challenge at the moment is that in too many schools those issues are not being identified as quickly as they should be. Parents should not have to wait for that to happen, and that is why through the wider reform that we want to drive both through the Department but also working with Ofsted is how we have a much clearer, earlier focus on schools that are stuck and are struggling. I just do not think it is good enough to allow these things to drift and we will not hesitate to act and intervene. We all know that children only get one chance through their education at school and we must intervene as quickly as we can where that is not working.

Yes, it is about the support to improve but we do need to maintain that clear view that if things are not working we must act in children's best interests. There is, of course, a balance to strike in this but a focus on children's outcomes and on standards in schools is where this all takes us back to. I think it is what parents want and there are frustrations about the system at the moment and how it does not drive that.

Q36 **Chair:** The reforms of Ofsted are also being undertaken in the context of Ofsted being named in the inquest into the tragic death of Ruth Perry. That is where the reference to high stakes judgments comes from, because that inspection had a devastating, catastrophic impact for that head teacher and we know that those impacts are widely reported among the profession. The Gilbert review referred to a defensive and complacent culture within Ofsted. How confident are you that reforms that are under way within Ofsted address the culture change as well as the changes in



practice that you seek to deliver?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I want to start by paying tribute to Ruth's family for the work in this area. I have met with Julia Waters on many occasions to discuss the family's awful, traumatic, devastating experience and the impact it has had on the wider community as well.

What that identified is that there are changes that are required through the inspection process by way of report cards but that wider shift is needed so that we can be confident that there is consistency in inspection outcome. This is something that I have discussed with the Chief Inspector on many occasions around the wider reform that is taking place within Ofsted, around the quality of inspection, around how they need to do more, and they recognise this, to have inspectors with expertise in the relevant phases, around the training that is available to inspectors, which is something that I know they have taken action on following the inquest findings and in many more areas. It is right that we make change around report cards but also the wider shift that Ofsted is leading in this area. I am confident that they are doing it. Of course, there is always more that is needed, particularly in terms of how they can recruit more brilliant school leaders into inspection, which I know has been a challenge in recent times.

Q37 **Caroline Voaden:** I would like to talk about the national funding formula. In Devon, where I come from, a school with 1,000 pupils would receive £8 million a year. In London, a school of the same size would receive £12 million a year, so a 33% difference in funding. What is your assessment of how the national funding formula currently works and what plans do you have for its future?

**Bridget Phillipson:** This is a complex area in terms of whether there were to be any change and how you get that right. The funding that we have allocated this year to schools was based on the previous funding formula. That was necessary to ensure that money got out the door to schools. I hear from colleagues across the House who present different challenges in different areas. I will be frank, it will be impossible to find a system that delivers what everyone wants all the time in every area. I appreciate that often what people want is more money into the school system, and we are investing more, but this does remain a challenge. We are looking at this area, and what the mechanism might be for determining school funding into the future. That work is under way. I cannot give you a timescale owing to the complexity of it, but we will take account of specific examples that constituency MPs will offer to understand what a different system might look like into the future.

Q38 **Caroline Voaden:** Obviously, everybody is not going to get everything on their wish list all over the country and there are lots of different demands, but it would appear that a bit more equity across the piece would, I would assume, be something you would like to see.



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**Bridget Phillipson:** We want to ensure that we have a fair and consistent formula that delivers for all communities, with a focus on making sure that we target often quite scarce resource where it will make the biggest difference.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** If the Committee will allow me to develop that, the national funding formula has been an important shift towards a system where it is transparent and clear why schools are funded as they are. Before the funding formula you had a wide range of different arrangements in different authorities and a lot of historic differences in funding. We are now at the place where you can explain the differences in school funding based on the characteristics of pupils and the size and shape of schools. The debate tends to be principally about people's views about how much different characteristics should be weighted.

I think it is worth saying that differences between schools in your constituency and schools in London will be about the composition of the pupils and the cost weighting for London. That is a real advance from a phase in which it was impossible to describe why there were differences between schools. Both under the instruction of Ministers and as officials we will always try to ensure we are clear about getting the best and most up-to-date evidence base on how we balance those factors and we will always listen to people. I do think it is worth saying that a child with the same characteristics now in different areas of the country is funded at the same level in different places through the national funding formula. That is quite an important principle to retain, I think.

Q39 **Caroline Voaden:** Recent estimates from the IFS indicate that growth in per pupil funding in 2025-26, 2.8% in cash terms, will not cover the expected increase in school costs. We know that some councils are asking to take money away from schools to secure the safety valve funding. In Devon they are talking about 0.5%. If this is done, schools will be 0.9% worse off under this Government than under the previous Government, which I am sure is not something you would like to see. What is the Department's plan to address this gap in funding?

**Bridget Phillipson:** At the Budget, even when you take account of the very constrained fiscal environment, the Chancellor did seek to protect key education priorities. That is why we did invest an additional £2.3 billion into schools, of which £1 billion was support for children with SEND. I do recognise the pressures that schools are under.

I would also add that the analysis from the IFS, for example, in this area does take account of the pressures that high needs and SEND are putting on the education sector. I think that underlines the need for reform. The reason we want to drive reform is not because we want to bear down on cost but when you look at the trajectory in terms of the financial sustainability challenges it presents, it demonstrates a need to do things differently.



Alongside that we did see today a slight dip in inflation. We know that there is more to do to stabilise the economy. That will feed through into schools' projections and planning, but I know it is tight for a lot of schools. I appreciate they remain under considerable pressure. We have invested more but there are wider challenges right across the public sector and the Chancellor must take decisions about how these can be managed across the board.

**Q40** **Darren Paffey:** Secretary of State, the condition of school buildings, certainly in my constituency and across the country, was a source of huge concern in the last Parliament. We had the RAAC crisis, what funding there was was limited and my experience was certainly that that tended to be more readily available to preferred models of school rather than all schools. Do you plan to change that approach? If so, what is your plan to address the continued poor state of many schools around the country?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I agree that there remain big and long-standing challenges in the schools estate overall. We more recently had the crisis around RAAC and I will bring in the Permanent Secretary in a moment on that, given that this is an issue that covers both Administrations.

RAAC, however, shone a light on what is clearly a wider challenge across our school and college estate where you increasingly see schools that are way beyond their design life. I believe that children should have the right to be in first-class accommodation and provision. We are investing more through the Budget in school capital. We also are investing more in our capital support for colleges, the first time since reclassification of our colleges. There is more that we need to do. This is a challenge in the wider context. It is why the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is looking at the infrastructure plan across government.

The argument that I would make around investment in school capital is, yes, it is about children's life chances, because we know the difference it can make to have fantastic facilities, but we all will have seen the difference it makes in construction jobs, skills, local growth and opportunities. Given the challenges that we face around particularly apprenticeship starts for our young people in key sectors such as construction, school rebuilding programmes and public sector investment can be a spur for private sector growth and job opportunities as well. If I may, I will pass to the Permanent Secretary on the RAAC side of things to give a brief update on where we are on that.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** I would be happy to do that. The first thing to say is that we reached the stage partway through last year where we had either structural mitigations or temporary buildings in place. Very rapidly, we reached the place where there was no child being educated under a RAAC roof and we then reached the place where every school had in place a good medium-term solution that meant that it could educate children well. We had good feedback from school leaders on the support that they received.



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We then announced the long-term RAAC removal route for every school that had RAAC identified. For 113 of those schools and colleges that was through grant funding; in other words, the school made a set of proposals, we gave them the grant and it is for them to take the work forward.

In general, it makes sense for schools to do significant building works in holiday periods, and for quite a lot of those schools when they looked at the plan they chose to do that this coming summer rather than last summer. About one third of those have already fully removed the RAAC from their school. Most of the remainder will seek to do that this summer.

For 123 schools and colleges our assessment was that it was better value for money and more sensible to put the school into the school rebuilding programme rather than to do a separate RAAC removal. That by its nature takes a little bit longer, but all those schools are now allocated to one of the three school rebuilding programme delivery groups. The first group are projects that will commence planning and feasibility work between April 2023 and March 2025. The beginning of that period is in the past, the eagle-eyed will spot, so we have 41 of those projects already into feasibility and under way. It is worth saying that in all those schools there is a good quality medium-term solution in place so they are not sitting with bits of red and white strip around them. They are in a good quality temporary solution while we do that work on the rebuilding programme.

Q41 **Manuela Perteghella:** Secretary of State, child poverty has increased massively with over 4 million children living in poverty, and we also have seen an increase in the number of children in poverty living in larger families of three or more children. You co-chair the Government's Child Poverty Taskforce. Will you look at the impact of the two child benefit cap first? We also want to know when exactly the child poverty strategy will be published and what educational provisions we can expect.

**Bridget Phillipson:** We will consider every area where we believe we can bear down on the number of children living in poverty, and that does extend to questions around the shape and nature of the social security system, absolutely, notwithstanding that there are real and serious challenges across the public finances.

We intend to report in the spring. The Prime Minister set this up urgently when we formed the Government. We met for the very first time in August. As you say, I co-chair the taskforce with the Work and Pensions Secretary. That is because we recognise that while there are questions that relate to the Department for Work and Pensions and to questions of social security, there are wider questions we must address as a society about how we have ended up with so many children growing up in poverty. That is about how we can increase parent incomes, how we can bear down on the costs that families face, and what action is required right across government to do that.



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I do think it is a stain on our society that so many children are growing up in poverty. There is a moral imperative to take action on that and we absolutely take on that responsibility.

Coming back to education, we know that this has a serious and damaging impact on children's education, on their life chances. I hear from far too many teachers and school staff that they are, amazingly because they are wonderful people, stepping in to provide food, washing clothes, helping families who are in temporary accommodation. I have met families through this work through fantastic third sector organisations where the reason they are struggling to get their children to school on time is because they are having travel an hour and a half every day on a bus across the city because they are living in a B&B. That is just not good enough for children in this day and age to not have good living conditions, to have access to a kitchen, a bedroom, a safe place, a quiet place to do their homework. This has serious and damaging impacts right across children's lives. We are committed to taking action in this area and I do look forward to setting out with the Work and Pensions Secretary what we intend to do right across government. Yes, this is the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions, but there is also the work of so many other Government Departments in this area.

Very briefly, the work that we have done so far has involved work across government in the ministerial taskforce. It has also involved drawing on a very wide range of experts, a range of not just our fantastic charities and others but from business, from energy providers, on skills and childcare—so hearing from a range of experts about what they believe we need to think about to make a step change in this area, changing the fundamentals so that all children across our country have a happy and safe childhood and do not experience what I believe to be avoidable poverty.

Q42 **Manuela Perteghella:** The difference in educational outcomes between children and young people from less and more affluent backgrounds is reported to be at its greatest level for more than a decade. That is another concerning development. How do you intend to reverse this?

**Bridget Phillipson:** It is a profound challenge. We do see growing evidence about the disadvantage gap that is opening up at a range of levels during a child's education. There is action that is required in the here and now for children who are currently going through the school system. Much of that is around workforce. It is about the work of the Child Poverty Taskforce.

In addition to that, all the evidence is so clear that what happens in the first five years of a child's life makes such a profound difference to what happens by the time that they leave school at the age of 16. It is why through our Plan for Change we have prioritised ensuring that more children than ever reach a good level of development by the age of five, because we know in terms of the evidence base that if they fail to reach



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that good level it has not just a lifelong impact on what they are able to achieve at the age of 16 but a profound impact on their earnings throughout their life.

We are focusing much of our efforts on expanding the childcare entitlement to ensure that families have access to high-quality early years provision, but that wider support that all families need. Becoming a parent for the first time is a wonderful and profound moment, but all parents experience challenge and difficulty and it is how we ensure that right across the country all families have access to good family help and early support, again that is not just the work of the Department for Education. It is the work of colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care around maternity support, around access to health visiting, and that takes us back to children with SEND and early identification of need alongside that.

**Q43 Chair:** The last Government was shamed by Marcus Rashford into acting on holiday hunger for the poorest children and out of that came the holiday activities and food programme. Are you planning to sustain that programme?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are going through a process at the moment in the Department of looking at all areas of spend. That is very challenging even with the prioritisation of the Chancellor as part of that Budget process, but I recognise the enormous value that the programme has provided and the difference that it has made to children's lives.

**Q44 Chair:** When will there be clarity on that? I am asking partly as a constituency MP where we have seen the huge benefits from that programme. I have local providers who are desperate to know if they will have the funding to be able to continue for the Easter holidays and beyond.

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are working through it as quickly as we can. We know that councils want clarity on this. We will set it out as quickly as we can at the earliest opportunity. I am alive to the challenge that you present and the need for certainty in this area.

**Q45 Jess Asato:** We know that one in five children has a diagnosable mental health disorder and that services are struggling to support these children. Labour's manifesto promised a mental health professional in every school. What steps have been taken to make this a reality? Is the Department still on track to have 50% of schools with mental health support teams by the end of March 2025?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are working as quickly as we can on this because I do recognise the challenge at the moment around support for children's mental health, around wellbeing and the levels of unhappiness that so many of our children experience, where we are internationally not in good shape if we want to look at what that means for our children here. We are working with colleagues across health on how we roll this out. They continue to roll out in schools and colleges across the country.





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As you say, the expectation is that it will cover 50% of pupils by the end of March this year, but we are working closely with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care on how we deliver on that commitment. I think it is essential that young people have access to high-quality mental health provision.

What we want to make sure alongside that, however, is that there is a clear relationship between in-school provision and how that connects to wider ongoing mental health support where the challenge might be greater in terms of the need for ongoing and more specialist support, so making sure that that alignment is right. I think the mental health support teams have shown a good way to join that together.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** Just to confirm that we are on track for the 50%.

Q46 **Caroline Voaden:** The previous Government published guidance on prohibiting the use of mobile phones in schools but they stopped short of an outright ban. Given the rising evidence we are seeing about the harm that mobile phones cause to children and young people, do you support a ban on mobile phones in schools?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I think all parents worry about access to social media around technology. I will respond to the very precise point that you ask. Some of the wider responsibilities across government are not simply mine alone, but there is a question particularly around technology and young people about how we equip them for the world to come in that online space. There are some great ways in which I think technology, particularly within our school system, can drive innovation.

On the precise question on mobile phone use within schools, my belief is that the guidance that we have in place at the moment is being followed by schools, that they are ensuring that use of mobile phones is not damaging children's learning. Many of the questions that arise from mobile phone use sadly arise after the school day has ended around the impact of bullying and terrible behaviour that we see arising out of it.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** The guidance that was published and that is still in force prohibits the use of mobile phones in schools throughout the school day, including during lessons but also the time between lessons and break times and lunchtime. We know school leaders implement that in different ways. Some of the conversations have been about the difference between, for example, policies that require children to keep the phone away versus those that literally prohibit it from coming into school. The implementation of that is linked to a whole set of other practicalities around the running of the school. Again, we do tend to start from the principle that we should let heads and teachers run their schools.

There is real clarity about the fact that we think it is important that the school day is a phone-free time for children. How a school chooses to implement that, we think, should be left up to schools. We continue to work with schools and school leaders on the practicalities of how that



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works and we will keep listening and learning on it. I think it is important that it is up to them.

Q47 **Caroline Voaden:** Are you considering further controls on social media use for children and other ways of protecting them from online harm?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We do want to keep this under review. You will appreciate that this drifts slightly beyond my responsibility. There is clearly, as you have described there, a connection between schools for which I am responsible and the wider issues around social media use and access to unsuitable material online. This is something that we are keeping under review across government in light of emerging international evidence and approaches.

Q48 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I have two questions, Chair. The first is just going back to what we were saying earlier about children moving schools midterm and children being disrupted midyear. You have talked quite powerfully about this being about every child in the country and your responsibility for every child, and that is good to hear. Some children have found themselves having to leave schools because of the VAT or for other reasons, or they have had changes in the Latin programme. For children particularly in exam years, who may be only in the middle of their mocks, just weeks now from their final exams that may govern the university futures that they get, how are you making sure the supports are put in place to ensure that those children who may be moving to a school that does not have the same course or who have not studied the same books in English or the same periods of history are getting to do their exam without being disrupted, without it being to their detriment, because the parents do not have the money that they need to continue their education?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Private schools as private institutions are responsible for determining what they charge parents, the level of fee that they apply and they have flexibility as to how—

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** That was not the question.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am answering the question, which is to say they can make decisions about what they ask of parents by way of contribution. If they believe there to be cases where that might be a challenge in the way that you have described, then those schools as institutions that can make decisions around their own budgets, around planning and levels of fees that they set can determine whether they can put in place additional support for such children.

Private schools have, as I have said, over an extended period inflated their fees considerably. They have gone up in a very significant fashion. I would also say that this was a clear manifesto commitment that we made. We were clear for some years that it was our intention to introduce this policy and private schools, like all businesses, can consider how they absorb cost, what cost they pass on, the level of service that



they provide, and what that means for the fees that they charge to parents. Ultimately, the responsibility rests with private schools as to the decisions that they make as independent institutions.

**Q49 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Sorry, could I bring you back to the question, please? The question was: there will be schools whose fees are set at a certain level and whose parents cannot afford that level anymore. Those children may have to leave those schools as a result. These are children. However affluent their parents may be and whatever their priorities are, these are children who are in a key part of their educational career. Where those children are back in the state sector under your responsibility to educate, what support are you putting in place to make sure that children who are in the middle of exam periods with specific subjects and exam boards that they have studied for are able to continue and achieve the best that they possibly can in the exams that may be only weeks away? That was the question.

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes, and the answer is that my expectation is that private schools, which can make decisions about how they support pupils and families within their institution, are able to make decisions about how they might put in place that support. To the wider point around the numbers and the movement we anticipate, the numbers are very small in the context of the wider school system.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** I will add two things. The first is that the work that we are doing with independent schools suggests that the vast majority have put measures in place to support children who might otherwise need to move at such critical moments. The second thing is that when we think about the receiving school—and as the Secretary of State says, our impact assessment suggests the numbers will be extremely small—across the state system schools are accustomed to managing pupil movement in-year, including at difficult times. If you think about children at the other end of the income spectrum, instability in housing and other difficulties means that they are significantly more likely to have to move at moments of educational difficulty and pressure. The state system—those of you who have been involved in teaching in the state system will know this—will work incredibly hard with the received child who has had to move during a GCSE period. This is not a new phenomenon for those children at the other end of the social spectrum. Schools have a set of means, techniques and methods that they will use to make sure they understand, for example, what subject a child has been studying, if it has changed and to work with them closely to support that.

It is important that we think thoughtfully and we are sympathetic to the situation of every individual child, as you say, but that we remember that movement and difficulty caused by financial pressure is still very predominantly something that is more frequently experienced by children at the bottom end of the social scale rather than at the top.

**Q50 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you for the answer to the question. I



appreciate that.

My second question was about degree apprenticeships. The degree apprenticeships offer young people the opportunity to learn and work at the same time, which can be a financially advantageous as well as an educationally advantageous programme. Does the Secretary of State support the principle of degree apprenticeship and does she intend to expand it?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I think degree apprenticeships provide a fantastic route for young people. We want to make sure that there are more of them. I want more apprenticeship starts right across the board. There is particularly a challenge alongside degree apprenticeships in level 2 and level 3 apprenticeship starts at the moment, where not enough young people are getting the chance that they deserve. Yes, more degree-level apprenticeships.

In addition, I want to make sure that they are an option that is available to the widest possible range of young people. Sadly, at the moment there is still often a lack of knowledge and awareness as to the availability of such opportunities and we need to ensure that there is wide understanding and that young people from a range of backgrounds are able to take up those opportunities.

Q51 **Amanda Martin:** Thank you, Secretary of State. I am going to the other end of the spectrum, which is early years, but it is something we know that if we get it right it has the best outcomes for young people.

I have heard from my own constituency, from both settings and the employees within them, that despite the increase in entitlement to free early years provision, the early years sector is facing considerable challenge in funding and workforce incapacity. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, the IFS, has said that your recent funding uplift for local authority core hour funding rates for early years providers will not offset the increases in the minimum wage and national insurance.

First, is the funding uplift adequate and what else are you doing to support this sector to ensure high-quality early years provision is accessible for all?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I have been clear that this is my single biggest priority because it is where we make the single biggest difference to children's life chances. It is how we set them up to succeed. It is central to our mission of giving every child the best start in life. It is why as part of the Plan for Change we had that focus on a record number of children reaching a good level of development at the end of the early years foundation stage assessment. To do that, having access to high-quality early years provision is crucial.

There are a few elements to that, if I may, Chair, around workforce. Yes, we need to ensure that we have a well-supported, well-trained workforce. We are seeking to grow the number of people working in early years settings. It is a brilliant, fantastic place to work but we know that there is



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more to do to align early years with the school system in particular around pedagogy, around development and around quality of teaching and care within the setting.

There is also a big challenge around places, where they are in the country, and access to parents. That is why we launched very early on and will announce this year the first phase of primary-based nursery, so to use some of that spare capacity that we talked about earlier to create more high-quality provision within schools.

There is further that we need to do to build up existing settings, but for many parents where they have several children within a school the chance to access that nursery provision alongside the wider school is so crucial, particularly in transition points and particularly for some of our most disadvantaged families.

I do understand the need to support providers at this point. It is why we did announce further plans around the expansion grant, which will focus on increasing the early years pupil premium, which will increase by over 45%. This is the equivalent of up to £570 per eligible child per year. That rate had stayed flat for many years. This was the single biggest increase in the early years pupil premium to respond to the pressures and challenges around places, to support providers, to create more provision for disadvantaged families, but also to give what is a much needed boost to the sector overall.

Q52 **Chair:** The IFS described the Government's funding announcement as only a fairly small nudge in the right direction towards the Plan for Change goal of 75% of five-year-olds achieving a good level of development by 2028. What else needs to be done to achieve that goal?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Through the Budget we announced over £8 billion by way of financial support towards the entitlements around early years education and care. That is a crucial part of this. Alongside that it is also around early family support. Yes, it is about the formal offer that we give to children and families but it is also about work under way in this area, how we expand more family support services across our country and how we bring together those services working with families to deliver better life chances.

The challenge and the opportunity that comes out of the system that we have now is that by the time the roll-out has concluded 80% of childcare costs in this country will be taxpayer backed. That is an enormous amount of money. It is welcome and much needed, but we do need to think seriously about whether we are getting the best possible outcomes from that investment. If we were to start afresh we would certainly not design a system that is engineered in this way. That is part of the wider, long term reform that we are thinking about in terms of the workforce, the provision, and how funding delivers for families.

Q53 **Chair:** On primary school-based nurseries, there has been some analysis



that shows that the areas of the country where there is capacity in schools to deliver school-based nurseries may not entirely match up with the areas in the country where there are childcare deserts. Combining that with a policy for the roll-out that favours working households, how are you going to ensure that children who happen to be born into a household where parents are not working, who are often the poorest children in the country, where we know that high-quality early years education can make the very biggest difference, are not left behind?

**Bridget Phillipson:** There is a question about take-up, including even among some parents who might be eligible, in terms of a reluctance or perhaps the lack of places that are available, who therefore are not able to take up what they might be entitled to. The early years entitlements are crucial and we know that it makes a big difference to children's life chances. We also know that all the evidence points to joined-up family support services alongside that.

Not all parents will decide that formal childcare, be that through a provider, a school or another setting, is what they want. Perhaps if they have several children that might not be the option that they would choose. They might prefer for their child to remain at home with them for a longer period. In that case, I think we need to consider what the wider offer is for all families and children, so bringing together those services alongside the entitlements. I do recognise the cliff edges that are there, some of the challenges that are there, within the current system. We are looking at that. It is complicated. The fiscal situation is difficult but I do recognise that it is through some of those options around early education and entitlements that we can see the biggest goals and it is how we can, alongside the reform that we want to bring in our school system, deliver better life chances for children and better outcomes by the end of primary school.

Q54 **Darren Paffey:** Turning to higher education, I know you are very alive to the challenge of higher education funding and you announced the measure to remove the freeze on fees. Even taking into account that measure, the Office for Students has warned that three-quarters of universities and other higher education settings could be in financial deficit within the next year. What comes next in terms of your action to deal with university funding?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I recognise that the higher education sector does need a secure financial footing and the pressures that many institutions are under at the moment. That is why I took the difficult but necessary decision to make the announcement last year around changes in funding to provide more investment into the sector but also some certainty for the sector, which has been lacking for a long time.

Through the reforms that we have also undertaken of the Office for Students there has been a much sharper focus on financial sustainability of institutions. Sir David Behan's, report begun under the last Government, was crucial. He is now as an interim chair leading the work



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of the organisation to have a much clearer focus on identifying problems sooner.

As to the longer term direction, throughout this year we will be engaged in a process of reform, working with institutions and providers, to deliver a better system. Our universities are world leading. They are beacons around the world. It is why so many students from different parts of the world choose to come here to study at our fantastic institutions. They make such a profound difference to towns and cities across our country, including in their economic contribution. My observation would be that for too long they were a political football rather than recognised as being the public good that they are.

I think there is more that we can ask of the sector, particularly where it comes to alignment around growth and local economies and what more they can do to join together, particularly with further education, to provide opportunities throughout people's lives to take on education, training and skills. That speaks to the wider reform across the system of skills training, around the apprenticeship levy and how we can involve employers in some of that where it is more closely aligned with local and regional economies.

**Q55** **Darren Paffey:** I probably should have declared the interest that I worked in a university for 20 years. I appreciate your answers on that.

You were very clear with universities when you removed the fee freeze that you expected more in terms of widening participation and other measures and that more would come. As part of that reform, can you set out a bit more detail of what that expectation is going to consist of, how you are going to monitor that, and what it will look like for the sector?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We do expect to see more when it comes to widening participation and access. Just to set out what I mean when I say that, yes, it is about university being an option for all young people who have what is necessary to go on to take up that opportunity, but it is also about rates of completion among young people. It is one thing to support young people to get in through the door. It is another thing to ensure that they have a brilliant experience at university and can complete their studies. That is particularly a challenge, often, for young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

There are also areas where I think we could do a lot more and ask a lot more of the sector. For example, care experience, young people, those coming out through the care system and making sure that institutions are doing a lot more to support what can be a different set of circumstances to your average 18-year-old with family backing. That is a part of it.

My challenge to the sector is that there is good practice that is out there. I have seen some great examples of work in this area and they are leading experts in evidence and in research. Share that, work together,



spread that across the system and avoid duplication—often there can be duplication in some of the work in this area—and to take it seriously.

**Q56 Darren Paffey:** Finally, when do you expect to have that package of expectations ready and in some kind of format to share with us and with the sector?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are engaging with the sector and with others—with business, with students, with the Office for Students—on what this will look like. It is a big piece of work that we have under way around that wider reform and we will continue to keep the House updated in this area. I do not know if Susan is able to say a little bit more about timescale on this. Jacqui Smith, our Minister in the Lords, is leading much of the engagement on this.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** Yes, we are targeting this summer.

**Q57 Amanda Martin:** You noted getting kids in the door at university is one hurdle and then it is making sure their time at university is the best it can be. In talking to students at Portsmouth University and those at Portsmouth Sixth Form College, and I know this is around the country, there is an issue in how they decide for their future based on being able to afford to live at university, meaning that many of them either choose not to go or must do practically a full-time job to afford to be there. The IFS has highlighted that support for the poorer students has fallen since 2020 and 2021, as maintenance loans have not increased in line with inflation. How does the Department intend to support students with the cost of living and particularly those that I have described from disadvantaged backgrounds?

**Bridget Phillipson:** What you just set out there I have heard from so many students right across the country. There is the increasing risk that students are taking decisions based on economic imperative and family circumstance rather than what is the best option in terms of the course and the longer-term outcomes that they seek. Again to the challenge on students at university increasingly working so many hours in retail jobs, in bar work, that makes it impossible to take up internships, other opportunities and wider study. Part of the reason that we have seen such an enormous issue here is around some of the inflation pressures that students face as well as everyone else, but through the statement that I set out last year around changes to fees we also increased the level of maintenance support that was available to students. This is a wider longer-term challenge that is part of that reform that we discussed earlier about the direction of the system and what more we need to do, but also to do with working with institutions on the support that they can put in place for students that face particular challenges.

**Q58 Amanda Martin:** One of them, just to come back on that, is around the cost of living and the housing elements. There were two students from my area that pay £10,000 a year for their accommodation and there are six students in that house. That is £60,000 a year. That is more than the





maximum maintenance grant.

**Bridget Phillipson:** Sadly, often students can pay extraordinary amounts of money and not necessarily get the best quality provision. That is why through the reforms across government to the private rented sector we want to ensure that there are higher standards. It is undeniably a problem that many students face around the cost of housing. That is again an area particularly where we have seen growth in recent years in some towns and cities. Universities also need to think about whether they have long-term planning around making sure that there is a good and appropriate level of housing that is available for students they intend to welcome, even though the institutions themselves are not necessarily responsible for directly putting in place that housing provision. They need to work with councils to manage that.

**Chair:** Patrick, you had a point of clarification. We do have a couple of other questions to come to.

Q59 **Patrick Spencer:** Earlier you made a clear point, clarifying your point on flexibility on pay. I just want to ask you the question again because it is not clear within the explanatory notes nor within the Bill. Will a head teacher be able to pay a member of their staff, a teacher, above the maximum threshold for that band or that grade of teacher?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes, because there will be a floor but no ceiling.

Q60 **Patrick Spencer:** Okay. That is not clear within the explanatory notes or the Bill. Will the Bill be amended?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am happy to make that clear to the Committee, Chair.

Q61 **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** I am pleased that we have a little bit of time to discuss something that is very important to the profession: teacher recruitment, training and retention. The National Foundation for Educational Research suggests that teacher pay would need to increase by almost 10% over three years for the Government target of recruiting 6,500 teachers to be reached. What actions are you taking to reach this?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Recruitment and retaining teachers is a key priority. We know that it is through teaching and leadership that we drive up standards in our schools through well-supported, well-qualified professionals who have the ongoing support that they need around their professional development and expertise. One of the first actions that we took as a Government was to honour the STRB pay recommendation around 5.5%, a clear signal of intent around how we value and support our teachers.

I do recognise that while pay is undeniably an important consideration, much of what is raised with me is around the workload pressures that teachers and leaders face, around the challenges on retention, particularly in key moments of people's lives. Teaching draws very



heavily on the contribution of women, and sadly too many women are making the decision as experienced teachers that they just cannot make life as a parent and as a teacher work. We are losing people when they have reached the point at which they are experienced, dedicated professionals and that is an enormous challenge. I think our best recruitment strategy is to have a strong retention strategy. It is about the ongoing professional development and support and we have work under way around that in terms of what changes we might seek to make to the early career framework, to the qualifications in terms of the NPQs available to teachers.

Alongside that, and this returns to our discussion around child poverty and the wider pressures that families are under around mental health—the lives and experience of young people and families—I want teachers to focus on teaching. That is what they came into education to do. They are fantastic people who will always go above and beyond, but when it comes to that focus of teachers and leaders on driving up standards in their schools, on focusing on teaching quality, around tracking progress of students, they can do that less effectively if they must spend inordinate amounts of time on wider challenges that families are facing because of wider societal failure. Taking action on those pressures around access to support services, housing and mental health I also believe will make a profound difference to the experience of teachers. That will take time but the profession has my commitment that I want to make that happen.

**Q62 Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** I am pleased to hear that the focus on retention is imperative as well. You touched upon increased flexibility. How do you think increased flexibility for teachers would impact on children's learning and development?

**Bridget Phillipson:** This is sometimes an area where there can be a bit of misunderstanding as to what it is we are talking about. Clearly, we need to ensure that we have teachers within school at the front of the class delivering a brilliant level of education for children. In fact, what I want to do is to ensure that teachers can do more of that. There is a question around use of technology in freeing up teacher time, using emerging technology around marking, planning and much more besides, so that we can allow teachers to prioritise that brilliant, direct, face to face intervention and support that makes a big difference.

I also believe that teachers should have more flexibility around planning and preparation time, that they should be able to undertake some of that from home where that is appropriate, but also part of what we seek to achieve through the legislation is that the brilliant and pioneering work that I have seen from many trusts across the country with a focus on flexibility, on retention around keeping people in the profession, that we expand that freedom, that ability to innovate, to all schools. There is good practice but that is not universal across the board. I want all school leaders to have that innovation, that dynamism and the ability to think about how they support their workforce, but working together because



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while we can talk about challenges in particular subjects around recruitment and retention, and that is undeniably true, increasingly it is across the board that we see the problem.

It is also important, and those of you who have a background in education and teaching will know that being a teacher is a fantastic and amazing job and makes such a big difference to children's lives. There is a need, I believe, also working with the profession, to be hopeful and optimistic about the change that we can achieve if we work together. Government cannot do this alone. The workforce, the profession, cannot do it alone either and that is why we are establishing Improving Education Policy Together, that partnership, because it is only through working together on some of these big and knotty challenges that we face where we make teaching a great place that our graduates want to come but also, crucially, where people want to stay.

**Chair:** I will bring in Mark for a quick supplementary and then we have one more to get to.

**Q63 Mark Swards:** Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that. When I was a teacher, when I reached the lofty heights of head of maths at my comprehensive school, I often found myself struggling with recruitment. We would put adverts out for jobs and we would be very fortunate if we received one applicant per position in some cases. I promise that was not just because they were coming to work for me. In addition to that, one of the things that kept teachers in the classroom was reduction in workload, which I always strive to do, so they can have more face to face time with their students. The announcement on AI this week was interesting, especially using AI to deal with marking so that they can spend more time with their students. Do you have any timescales in mind on how long it will take to implement the changes with AI in all our schools?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We have some innovative work that is happening through the Department at the moment. I will bring in the Permanent Secretary to say a little bit on this.

It is also about making sure that the tools that we have are well developed and that schools have a sense of clarity about where the most effective opportunities in this area—the tools that are available—are. We have rather a lot of work under way so that schools will have that ability to draw on the tools and opportunities that are out there around AI.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** The first thing to say is that there are a lot of schools moving into this space already. In a system where we have quite a lot of freedom of flexibility at school level, schools can start to do these things. I think the critical role for the Department is in supporting schools to do that and ensuring that we understand the evidence base on what is working and then we spread that in a sense as we have done in other areas of pedagogy. The critical thing is that we have good learning loops so that people can see what has worked.



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I will pick up a couple of things that we are doing. We are doing—

**Chair:** I will ask you to be super brief, Permanent Secretary, please.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** Sorry. Of course. We are working on core educational data store content, which is a good driver for a good quality AI. We have good work going on through things such as Aila, which is an AI lesson planner, which is already available to all teachers. We also have a pilot, evaluated pilot work running through EEF and more widely to start to test them.

**Chair:** I am going to move on. Jess, a final question.

Q64 **Jess Asato:** Just very quickly to return to the children's wellbeing Bill, the Bill requires schools and local authorities to co-operate to manage school admissions and supply of local places. How is this going to work in practice and how frequently do you expect to use your powers to intervene on admissions?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Infrequently would be the expectation because we would require schools and councils to work together in terms of admissions and place planning. We have talked about demographic change several times, or I have certainly talked about demographic change several times. We need to think about how we are managing place planning and admissions in a different set of circumstances and dynamics but also how we ensure that vulnerable children do not slip through the cracks and end up without a school place at all.

Q65 **Chair:** There is currently in my former profession of town planning a duty on local authorities to co-operate on housing number and housing planning. In practice, what that duty often means is that local authorities meet it by meeting together to say why they cannot accommodate their neighbour's housing needs in their own borough and it is not a functional duty. What is the mechanism within the Bill that makes local authorities and academy chains and other types of schools work together effectively on admissions policy?

**Bridget Phillipson:** This sends a very clear message into the system about the duty to work together. We are confident that this message will be heard that people want to do this, but where they refuse to co-operate the Secretary of State will be able to intervene to deliver for children.

Q66 **Chair:** But you expect that to happen infrequently?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes. I anticipate that through the legislation, through the signal that we are sending into the system, this will lead to a step change in behaviour and response. Should that not be the case, then of course I will intervene to protect children's interests.

**Chair:** Thank you. Secretary of State, Permanent Secretary, thank you very much for coming to meet with us today. We look forward to future accountability sessions.