



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Accountability hearings](#), HC 262

Tuesday 9 February 2021

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

Questions 516 - 534

Witness

I: Vicky Ford MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witness

Witness: Vicky Ford MP.

Q516 **Chair:** I have spoken a lot already so I will save my questions to the end. Fleur, do you want to start, please? Thanks to you, Vicky. I am sorry that we have overrun but, as you can see, this is very important.

Fleur Anderson: My question is about funding for early years and in particular for nurseries. Early years providers, as you know, remain very concerned about their financial stability, particularly in the light of the return to the follow-the-child funding. Many parents do not want to send their children, or are not able to because of shielding or for other reasons, and providers have not been able to do their recruitment drives as well as they would normally do, so they are very concerned about their future.

Also, state-maintained nurseries do not have access to the catch-up funding, which seems very unfair to them. They have to pay business rates, which other nurseries do not have to do. The financial situation for state-maintained nurseries is different from that for state-maintained nurseries in primary schools. They are very concerned as well. A number of nurseries, both the state-maintained and PVIs, feel they may not survive this year, for financial reasons. Do you have an assessment of the overall situation? Do you know where most nurseries may be at risk of failure? What is the Department planning to do to assuage these concerns in the sector so that we keep our nurseries and are able to build back when we can come out of covid, knowing that there will be childcare and early years education in future?

Vicky Ford: I stay in very close contact with early years organisations, as does the Department, and we are closely monitoring the attendance numbers.

We have put in unprecedented support for the early years sector, not only continuing to fund free childcare entitlements but also making sure that providers can access the furlough scheme, childminders can access the self-employment coronavirus self-employed scheme, and funding the various different grants that are available to parts of the sectors. We announced at the spending review an uplift in the hourly funding rates for local authorities for next year. The two year-old entitlement will go up by at least 8p an hour and the three and four year-old rates will be uplifted by 6p an hour. We calculate that those rates of increase are higher than the costs that nurseries may face through the uplift in the national living wage. We will be sharing our calculations.

We made some announcements about funding going in line with attendance. We do the January census every year for lots of different reasons. For example, you might have had a new housing estate open, resulting in new demand on a nursery. We did advise local authorities on how to do the census this year. You gave the example of a parent who



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may not be sending in a child because they are concerned about covid. Provided that the parent has not permanently removed the child from the nursery, that they have made a temporary decision during the lockdown and the nursery is keeping the place open for them, the nursery can count the child for the census. We have made that very clear in the advice. That is how we have worked with the sector throughout, making sure that we have tried to address questions and concerns as quickly as possible. We gave that advice for the census, which I know helped many in the sector.

We have also increased the amount of flexibility for using the furlough scheme. Nurseries that may not have recruited as many children this year as they have in previous years may use the furlough scheme more. If they are seeing a drop in public sector income, they can use the furlough scheme more.

We have also put in another—if I may say this word in politics today—backstop to local authorities. If they see attendance growing over the term, they will be able to come back to us and we will be able to give them more early years entitlement funding, up to 85% of what they had previously, because that is where we expect the numbers to level out.

There is more use of the furlough scheme, extra advice on how to do the census and the extra backstop for local authorities.

Maintained nursery schools are an important part of the ecosystem. I have one in my patch. I know how much they are loved. They will get that supplementary funding. They do get other support—

Chair: Can you be as concise as possible? I am trying to help you, Vicky, so you can finish sooner. Fleur, do you have any more questions?

Q517 **Fleur Anderson:** On the backstop funding—the crisis funding—some of the nurseries will not receive some of the additional funding. The crisis funding is very welcome, knowing that many more providers may close in the more disadvantaged areas and heading that off. Earlier you mentioned the importance of the UC uplift. Do you support the continuation so that parents from the most disadvantaged families will have the extra funding that they need?

Vicky Ford: The UC question is a question for the Chancellor not for the Children's Minister. I have been working with other colleagues to make sure that we hold on to that promise from the Prime Minister that no child should go hungry during the pandemic. I have been focusing on that.

It is important that local authorities have responsibility for ensuring that there is enough childcare in their areas. They have some flexibility in moving some of the entitlement funding around, but they need to make sure—and I have made it clear to them—that they are passing it on. We are closely monitoring the take-up of places by parents and the capacity of providers, through our parental surveys and the data that we collect.



Q518 David Johnston: Vicky, a lot of questions about special educational needs in the last few months have been referred to the forthcoming SEND review. Can you say when we can expect it to be published and what you think the balance in it will be between things we have learnt in the pandemic and longstanding, pre-existing problems?

Vicky Ford: I intend to publish the SEND review in the spring. It has been a very important priority for the Government. It needs to be done in a way that I can also work with parents and families on the consultation, in a co-produced way. I can completely understand that families have so many things going on during the pandemic, and we need to have the headspace to make sure that everyone can engage. Incidentally, thank you, Robert, for your Committee's excellent report on the SEND review. The NAO report and other reports have also been fed into it.

We are looking at some key priorities. Improving the outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs means getting a much earlier focus on what works for the child, identifying the early needs. I mentioned the Bradford autism project, which is very exciting. We want to find ways to improve the experience of the system. There is so much bureaucracy in the system at the moment and families are often struggling with paperwork rather than getting the support their child needs. We also want to bring in intervention and support so a child can continue in mainstream. Ofsted has been very helpful, bringing changes into the inspection framework and making it clear that a school cannot be outstanding unless it is inclusive for children with SEND. That is important. We also want to make the system more financially sustainable. As you pointed out in your report, we have put a lot more money in.

Chair: In a nutshell, please.

Vicky Ford: It is a very important piece of work, Robert, for so many children.

Chair: I know, but we have other questions, a lot to get through.

Vicky Ford: The review is coming. It will be a piece of work that will have some changes coming.

Chair: Got it. David, please, next question.

Q519 David Johnston: I have one quick supplementary question, Vicky. We have heard from witnesses that some children with SEND thrived in lockdown. Do you think there are any policy implications from that, as Robert said, very briefly?

Vicky Ford: Yes, some children have thrived. We heard some of that conversation earlier on in the lockdown. I spoke to some foster families of children who had social anxieties and who had been struggling. However, I think that electing to home educate your child is a big decision, especially for children with special education needs. It is a very long-term decision to take a child out of school permanently. I have worked with



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the Council for Disabled Children to send advice to parents who are considering it to make sure that they think through the implications. Different children have reacted differently, obviously.

Q520 Tom Hunt: There is a point about SEND and those with dyslexia and dyspraxia, which we touched on earlier. I spoke to the headmistress of a school in the south-east of England that is entirely for dyslexic pupils. Her view was that live education, live lessons, were particularly important for those with dyslexia and dyspraxia. She was able to offer that because it was a specialist school, but I fear that it would be a different story for some.

I think there needs to be a look at how the cancellation of exams may have had a particular impact on children with dyslexia or dyspraxia, who often prefer exams because they can pull a little bit out of their hats. They are unconventional learners who often perform well in exams—better than they do in a classroom environment, so classroom assessment may not work for them.

I am encouraged by what you said at the start of this meeting about the catch-up commissioner and the focus on SEND. In some ways, the SEND review can benefit from having been delayed because it can encapsulate all this important stuff we are talking about, about the impact of covid.

I probably will touch base with you online. There is not much of a question there, just some comments.

Vicky Ford: Obviously it might have been much better for those sorts of students to have had exams, but we are now consulting on how the assessment process will work. The consultation has just closed. We fed in about the need to be sensitive to those with special educational needs and also to children in care, who may have moved from where they were being educated during this time. Those sorts of sensitivities are important.

We want to see a better universal offer of dyslexia support from all mainstream schools. It would be a good part of the SEND reforms if a child could be supported in the mainstream in a better way, and get help earlier.

Q521 Tom Hunt: It was good to see that so many of those organisations involved in the tutoring programmes have a background in SEND. That was welcome.

Vicky Ford: We have learnt a huge amount about how to support children with SEND online. Our demonstration national star academy has been working with over 10,000 teachers up and down the country taking part in webinars and learning and sharing best practice on online learning for children with special education needs.

Q522 Kim Johnson: Minister, prior to the pandemic more families were reliant on foodbanks and the pandemic has increased food insecurity for many families, which has impacted on educational attainment. How are you



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planning to address that, to avoid the vouchers chaos that saw private companies like Edenred profit from child poverty? Will you commit to extending free school meal support for families during the school holidays, at least until after the pandemic, and beyond?

Vicky Ford: Let me make it clear, there has been no profiteering on the back of our contract with Edenred. We pay them the amount of the food voucher that goes to the family. They give a discount back to the Government. We have negotiated a slightly bigger rebate this time, but there has been no excessive profiteering. It is important to point that out.

We are also going through a public procurement exercise in case we need to keep the voucher for longer. We could not go through a public procurement exercise in the very beginning of the pandemic because it would have delayed the start of the voucher scheme for so long. We got the Edenred voucher system up within 11 days. Of course, it was quite a rollercoaster at the pass, but Edenred has invested very significantly. Let me get you the latest numbers, if I can: £47 million-worth of e-codes have been redeemed as of last Wednesday and 96% of parents say that they are happy and satisfied.

As for holiday support, we did put in that covid winter support scheme—£170 million—which provided support for food, fuel and other expenses for families over the Christmas holidays. It will be there again at half term. When we set it up in November, we made it very clear that it would be there through to what was then considered probably the most likely time of lockdown, which was the first three months of this year. It is there for much more than just a national voucher. It is there for families who have pre-school children. They can use it for food support during the rest of the week or for the entire family, not just for the child's lunch. It is there for fuel bills. Local authorities have been doing an excellent job of making sure they use Government money to get support out to families.

We are starting to plan HAF for Easter and are in discussions about other support, continuing to assess the situation as we go on, as the Government have continued to do throughout the pandemic. The Prime Minister has made it very clear that no child should go hungry during the pandemic and that is what I am working on with other Ministers.

Q523 **Kim Johnson:** I am talking about not just during the pandemic but after the pandemic, Vicky, and Easter in particular.

Vicky Ford: We have our holiday activities and food project going national throughout the Easter holidays, summer and Christmas, which is the big bit that I am responsible for. General welfare questions go to the Department for Work and Pensions, which is why that Department has led on the covid winter support fund. Okay?

Kim Johnson: I don't think my question was answered.

Q524 **Chair:** Do you have any more questions, Kim?



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Kim Johnson: No, because my questions were not answered, so carry on.

Vicky Ford: Kim, with due respect, it is challenging for me to answer if you are asking questions about things that are within the responsibility and competency of another Minister. I have told you exactly where we are now and I have told you that no child will be going hungry. That is the Prime Minister's promise and that is what we have been working to deliver during this pandemic.

Q525 **Chair:** Vicky, I have a couple of questions. You have kept early years open, which I welcome. Can you explain why early years are open and say how safe it is, just to reassure people outside?

Vicky Ford: We kept early years open for three reasons, all of which are important. We have spoken a lot about this already. The early years experience is the crucial time of a child's educational development. It is when they get the communication skills and social skills that set them up for life. You cannot get those months back and you cannot care for a really young child online, so the risk to their future of them not being able to get into the early years settings is very significant. You can compare to the scientific evidence and modelling that the early years settings remain very low-risk environments for children and staff. Nowhere is zero risk, but the risk remains very low.

Q526 **Chair:** And transmission rates?

Vicky Ford: The evidence suggests that young children are less susceptible to infection and unlikely to be driving rolling transmission. There is less transmission in the early years than elsewhere and that, Robert, is partly because young children tend to have less contact with other households outside their setting or their own households, compared with, for example, teenagers and others.

Q527 **Chair:** I accept what you say and I agree very much. I am very pleased that they are open. But given that the same criteria, and what you have just said about low rates of transmission and being safe, according to Public Health England, apply to primary schools, on the logic of the argument that you have made for early years—which is in my view exactly right—why not at least open primary schools, or at least some years in primary schools?

Vicky Ford: The modelling that was done indicates that there is a lower rate of transmission from early years children compared with primary school children, which would be lower than for secondary schools.

Q528 **Chair:** Public Health England spoke last week about low rates of transmission, exactly the same reasons you have just given for nurseries.

Vicky Ford: I am looking at the very low rates of infection in the youngest children. In taking the original decision on the lockdown, if we were going to reduce community transmission by closing secondary and primary schools, we would be able to keep the early years open. It is



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most important for the educational journeys of the youngest children and that is why we kept those very young ones on. We have promised to give schools the two-week notice period before they come back again. That is why we are working towards the 8 March date.

Q529 **Chair:** The same arguments seem to apply to primary schools and early years. I don't understand why it is safe to open early years but not safe to open primary schools after half term.

Vicky Ford: It is about the balance between the risk to the child's development and the really important early years experience development. Primary school education is important as well, but it is those really early months that are important to a child's development that you have to weigh against the other risks.

Q530 **Chair:** You are in charge of opportunity areas. Could you write to the Committee, rather than say it now, about the outcomes in opportunity areas and what effect they have for the disadvantaged generally and also what opportunity areas that have lot of white working class disadvantaged pupils have done to try to improve outcomes?

Vicky Ford: I would love to let you know about some of those projects and their outcomes, yes.

Q531 **Chair:** Finally, a question about truancy. It was written in *The Telegraph* on 9 January that overall truancy rates had almost doubled in autumn 2020, that the average absence rate in recent autumn terms was 4.4%, and this rose to 8.5% in late November. This was after covid-related absences were factored in. I want to understand how well the Government's REACT teams are set to co-ordinate the DfE's engagement with local authorities across education and children's services working at this time. Could you write to us and set out any details of their findings? Are you worried about truancy when schools go back fully?

Vicky Ford: I am worried about the vulnerability of children and children at risk of harm, obviously. That comes into my job. What are the risks to a child who has not been in contact with school, has not been in school, and not in online contact with school? I mentioned part of the work earlier, but the Barnardo's See, Hear, Respond project is very important here because it is sending out independent youth workers to identify the children and young people who have not been attending school and make contact with them. There may be wellbeing or harms issues. The project has been very important and not just through Barnardo's. We have been working through all sorts of other youth organisations.

I have written to all our safeguarding partners across the country to ask them to particularly focus on this cohort—police, health and education coming together to focus on this group who are not attending—to find out if there are underlying safeguarding issues and how we can identify them and work with the schools to support those young people.

Q532 **Chair:** I understand you are in charge of a mental health action group for



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children. Is that right?

Vicky Ford: Yes, I co-chair with Michelle Donelan.

Q533 **Chair:** Will you look at the new frontier of vulnerabilities and safeguarding concerns that have arisen during the coronavirus pandemic, or are you confined to looking at mental health generally?

Vicky Ford: That particular action group will be looking at mental health and wellbeing, looking at the support that we have already put in. The Education Return project has been well picked up across the country, supporting teachers with advice and training about the sorts of concerns that young people have at the moment, whether that is children who are reacting to being bereaved or are anxious about their long-term prospects or income issues. This is the sort of advice that is being given to teachers in schools, who have also been put in touch with local experts if they have more challenging cases. It has been helpful.

The action group will be looking at what more support may be needed now, which may be signposting people to existing support, but also at our long-term commitments to improve support for mental health, which were part of the Green Paper proposals.

Q534 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed for your time. It has been a marathon.

Vicky Ford: I am sorry if I have given some lengthy answers.

Chair: That is okay. I know you as my constituency neighbour, and I say that in a very nice way. Thank you so much for a quite gruelling session—it is appreciated—and also for what you are doing on food poverty. No doubt we will see you again soon. Thank you.