

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: COVID-19: Education, HC 944

Thursday 25 March 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 25 March 2021.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Meg Hillier (Chair); Shaun Bailey; Olivia Blake; and Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General; Laura Brackwell, National Audit Office; and Marius Gallaher, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts, were also in attendance.

Questions 1 to 114

Witnesses

[I](#): Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education; Andrew McCully, Director General for Early Years and School Groups, Department for Education; and Mike Pettifer, Director of Covid Response, Department for Education.

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Support for children's education during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic (HC 1243)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Susan Acland-Hood, Andrew McCully and Mike Pettifer

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee. Today we are looking at the support that children have received for their education during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is very timely, given that we are just a year on from the first official lockdown. This is an area that has obviously been of concern to the Committee. We are not going to be looking at free school meals today, which was the subject of a separate report, but in broad-brush terms we will be covering other areas of the Department's preparedness and challenging them on what lessons they have learned.

We are particularly keen to hear from our witnesses about the support for the most vulnerable children and the attainment gap, as well as the plans for catch-up. I thank the National Audit Office for its very helpful Report on this issue, which looked at the different aspects of the response and assessed how well some of those have worked. Obviously, it is a moving situation. We expect that we might get some updates from our witnesses about what has happened over the last couple of weeks.

I welcome our witnesses today: Susan Acland-Hood, the permanent secretary at the Department for Education; Andrew McCully, the director general for early years and schools at the Department for Education; and Mike Pettifer, head of the Covid response unit at the Department for Education.

Before we go into the main session, Ms Acland-Hood, I want to check where things are with the review of level 3 qualifications, not just A-levels. Very often the discussion is around what is going to happen, both with Covid and more generally, to A-levels. I wondered if there was any update on level 3 qualifications that are not A-levels.

Susan Acland-Hood: I want to check, Chair, exactly what you want to ask me about. Is it the arrangements for level 3 qualifications that are not A-levels for this year, the review that we are undertaking for the future of those level 3 qualifications, or both?

Q2 Chair: It was about the review, but it seems crazy to ask about the review without finding out a bit more about what the plans are for this year as well. That certainly was a big concern a few weeks ago.

Susan Acland-Hood: Certainly. We, along with Ofqual, consulted on vocational and technical qualifications, alongside the consultation we did on general qualifications for this year. I welcome the very good response we had to that consultation. We have set out, again along with Ofqual, the proposed arrangements, which, broadly speaking, tweak the VTQs that are



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more general qualification-like, very similarly to A-levels and GCSEs for this year, but also retain the ability to do an assessment for those that bring a licence to practise. A crude example is that you would not want somebody to become qualified to fit your gas boiler without having gone through a real, proper assessment of whether or not they can fit a gas boiler. We will retain assessments for those licence to practise type of qualifications. The information on the arrangements is available on the Ofqual website.

In terms of the review of level 3 qualifications, we have done the second round of consultation, and we are looking very carefully at the responses that we had from learners, from schools and from colleges on the future of level 3 qualifications. We want to end up with a slimmer and better range of level 3 qualifications. One of the things that is a challenge in the technical qualifications landscape is the sheer number of qualifications available, and the complexity and confusion that that potentially creates for learners, for parents and for employers in making choices.

Q3 Chair: When are we going to see the final results of that review? We have had challenges before with qualifications being introduced very fast. Do you have a timetable? Because of Covid, are you looking at any flexibility around that timetable?

Susan Acland-Hood: As I say, at the moment we are looking at the results of the second round of that consultation. We expect to bring forward proposals on that shortly, but we will be very mindful of the lead time that people need in order to prepare.

Q4 Chair: You say “shortly”—do you mean before the summer, or the autumn?

Susan Acland-Hood: I am sorry, Chair, but I do not want to firmly commit today. I hope it would be before the summer.

Q5 Chair: You talked about being mindful of lead-in times. Being mindful is all very well, but people want to know roughly what the lead-in time might be, given that T-levels were introduced at pace with a ministerial direction, and we have seen changes to the A-level and GCSE curriculums in recent years that have been very challenging on the ground. Layer that with Covid, and it adds complications. What sort of lead-in time are you looking at—in broad terms, if you cannot tell us precisely? Is it a year, two, three?

Susan Acland-Hood: What we are looking at very carefully is the circumstances around the particular qualification. For example, ESFA have withdrawn funding from a relatively large number of qualifications with a very limited lead time recently, because the qualifications had no entries. Under those circumstances, it is perfectly reasonable not to give an enormous lead time because the impact is small. What we want to do is give appropriate lead time, given the circumstances around the particular qualifications, rather than say that there is a single blanket lead time for everything.

Chair: We will leave that there for now, because I am sure we are going



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to come back to it at some point in the future. I am going to ask Olivia Blake to come in now.

- Q6 **Olivia Blake:** Good morning. We have had several timeframes given to the Committee previously on this question, but could I ask again when the SEND review will be published?

Susan Acland-Hood: There is lots of work going on in the Department on that. I know that I have spoken to the Committee before about the fact that we recognise that it is taking us longer than we hoped. I am sure we will speak about it later in the hearing, but it was partly because we thought quite carefully in the Department about how we were prioritising our work through the pandemic, and one of the things that has gone slower than we had hoped is the SEN review. Again, we will publish during the course of this year. A huge amount of work is going on, and you will see that shortly.

- Q7 **Olivia Blake:** During the course of this year: can you be any more specific than that?

Susan Acland-Hood: I cannot.

- Q8 **Olivia Blake:** Do you have an anticipated timeframe for any implementations of the recommendations that come out of that review?

Susan Acland-Hood: The implementation will be a kind of action plan that has different timeframes, depending on the different activities. The other thing we are acutely conscious of, of course, is the interrelationship between the SEND review and the spending review. We have that timeframe very closely in mind as well.

- Q9 **Olivia Blake:** Just to be clear, you cannot give us a firmer date than “this year”.

Susan Acland-Hood: Not today; I am sorry.

Olivia Blake: That is a surprise. We have had promises of early this year and spring in the past. I am sure we will continue to be pushing for that publication.

Chair: We are going to come to some of the issues around some of the support for the children affected by the SEND review as part of our discussions today about Covid. We will leave that there for now, Ms Blake, and I will turn to Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

- Q10 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Good morning, Ms Acland-Hood. The NAO concludes, on page 45 in a concluding paragraph: “Aspects of its”—the Department’s—“response, however, could have been done better or more quickly, and therefore been more effective in mitigating the learning pupils lost as a result of the disruption.”

We all accept that the pandemic was a huge circumstance that overcame all Government Departments, but it seems that your Department was not perhaps as well prepared for a national pandemic as it might have been. Do you accept the NAO’s conclusions?



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Susan Acland-Hood: The first thing I want to say is that I thank both the staff in my Department and particularly teachers, head teachers, parents and pupils up and down the country, who have done such an extraordinary amount of work in completely unprecedented circumstances during the pandemic. I will not labour it, because it is obvious, but it was a completely extraordinary set of circumstances. I think all of us have had a year that, I hope, we will never see the like of again, and we have learned a huge amount during that year.

I think it would be ridiculous not to accept that, looking back and knowing what we know now, there are things that we might have done differently. What we have tried to do is to learn, throughout the course of the pandemic, as much as we possibly can, so that each time a new circumstance presents itself, we learn from the thing that came immediately before it.

Q11 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: You will have seen the NAO recommendations around lessons learned and so on. When do you expect to conduct that sort of review?

Susan Acland-Hood: The critical thing is that we think about that in concert with the rest of Government. There is an awful lot about this pandemic where what we were doing was collectively responding to what was a national health emergency. We want to do that, looking across the whole piece. We take the NAO recommendation on that incredibly seriously, but I would like to do it in a way that is consistent and collaborative with other pieces of work across Government, to look at lessons learned.

Q12 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: One of the recommendations is about Ofsted. Ofsted has started its routine inspections on schools that need improvement—the bottom tiers, if you like. When do you expect Ofsted to get back to its normal inspection regime?

Susan Acland-Hood: There should be an announcement on what is happening next on Ofsted inspections very shortly, in a matter of days.

Q13 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: In a matter of days. That is helpful; thank you.

Finally, on the role of the recovery commissioner you have just appointed, can you give us a little bit of flavour of what you expect him to do, and who he reports to in your Department?

Susan Acland-Hood: The recovery commissioner has been appointed. He is reporting to the Secretary of State as well as to the Prime Minister. There is a set of things that we had already put in place to try to make sure that we were helping young people to start to recover from the pandemic, even during the course of this year. Of course, there is the complication that we are not out of the woods yet. There are still things going on, but at the same time we are trying to make sure that we are putting better and better support in place.



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As the Prime Minister said when he announced Sir Kevan Collins's appointment, we want to recognise that the recovery is something that will have a longer impact. He is looking both at the response now and at what we need to do over the course of the rest of the Parliament, to make sure that we put in place the best possible recovery for children and young people.

He is looking at children and young people aged two to 19, early years and 16 to 19 provision as well as schools. He is looking at recovery not just focused on children's academic learning but on the wider things where they may have missed out. Alongside that, we are working very hard to think about any potential impact on children's mental health.

There is something about not just taking a deficit model either. We know that children can be very resilient. We do not want to pathologise a whole generation of children by talking only about things that they have missed. We also want to think about the opportunities for positive change as a result of the pandemic, without minimising the fact that there are lots of people who have lost a great deal, of course.

Q14 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Given all that positive aspiration from you, his initial appointment was for nine months. Who will decide whether that is extended or not?

Susan Acland-Hood: As these things normally are, if we get to that point, it will be something that would be a collective decision. He has a say in that, of course. It will be one of the things that would be discussed and decided between him, me, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.

I have known Sir Kevan for a long time. He is an extremely respected and impressive figure in the world of education. He has extremely good connections, and he works in a very positive and collaborative way. He is working hand in glove with the Department. Whether he stays or not, he will work with us in a way that means the legacy of what he has done will fit seamlessly into the way we work, and will roll forward.

Q15 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will he report to Parliament?

Susan Acland-Hood: He has been asked to report to the Secretary of State and to the Prime Minister. He has already appeared in front of the Education Select Committee. He is not formally reporting to Parliament, but I know that he will happily come and speak about his work.

Q16 Chair: Thank you very much. We can certainly pursue that with Ministers if we need to. We are now going to move into more detail on the work of the NAO and the work of the Department in preparing for Covid. The obvious question that everyone has to ask, Ms Acland-Hood, is, why was the Department not better prepared for mass school closures? Did you play any part in Operation Cygnus in 2016, which one would have hoped would flag up some of these issues?



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Susan Acland-Hood: I am going to ask Mr Pettifer and Mr McCully to come in, because they were part of that. Yes, we played a part in Operation Cygnus, and I will say one very brief thing. I think there is something for us to reflect on collectively across Government, which is that we had plans for pandemic flu, but they were quite specific to pandemic flu, and they were very focused on people being—

Chair: Ms Acland-Hood, could you lean into your microphone a bit? You are very faint.

Susan Acland-Hood: I am so sorry. I think it is true across Government that they were quite focused on pandemic flu, and very focused on people being ill. In other words, Departments were asked to say what they could do if certain proportions of their workforce were off work ill. The assumption was that you would be keeping things open, but you would be running them with people ill.

The recollection I have is that our plans—again, I genuinely think this was an issue across Government—were very focused on the illness and not on the things you might be doing in order to manage the illness. That is certainly something we should reflect on, going forward.

Q17 **Chair:** Back in 2009, I was not a regular member, but I attended a Cabinet Sub-Committee on pandemic planning, which was then for avian flu. At that meeting, the scientists talked about the possible need to close schools. I remember it particularly because I said that surely parents would need to work and they would take it in turns to look after each other's children, and then it would spread the virus. They said that, even if they did that, it would be less than spreading it in schools.

If, as a substitute member of that Committee, I was asking that simple question then, do you know why that question was not being asked? Was it the shape of Cygnus, or was it that education did not have enough of a stake at the table in those discussions? Where was the gap?

Susan Acland-Hood: I will hand over to Mr Pettifer, who is going to talk about our role in the Cygnus work. I think the simple answer is, as we have seen through this pandemic, that there is a range of scientific opinions on these things.

Q18 **Chair:** Okay. Mr Pettifer, over to you.

Mike Pettifer: With regard to Cygnus, schools have plans for closure themselves, and they work with local resilience forums in response to issues and challenges. Those tend, historically, to be based on local issues such as severe weather conditions, responding to flooding and that kind of thing. The forums are based locally.

We did not have a national plan for closing all schools at the same time, but there are plans in place locally, and they have the ability to close clusters or groups of schools in response to certain threats. That would include something like the flu virus. That is where we were.



In terms of planning ourselves—

- Q19 **Chair:** Given that there had been pandemic planning going on in government for years—it was the top non-malicious risk—had there been any thought at all given to national and international impacts? We had the ash cloud, which had an impact on all international air travel. Was there no consideration about an impact anywhere? It might fall to the Department for Education, but in all the inquiries this will be a question everyone is going to ask. Can you point us to anywhere where there was even a discussion about a national school closure?

Mike Pettifer: I was not involved in the discussions at the time, I am afraid, so I cannot point you to a specific meeting or set of minutes, where it was discussed. The local response can aggregate nationally. There is the ability to respond nationally because—

- Q20 **Chair:** Basically, what you are saying is that there was a practical plan in every local area that, if you had to close nationally, the expectation would be that those local roll-outs would amalgamate, to be, effectively, a national closure.

Mike Pettifer: Yes. Also, bear in mind that our expectation would not have been to close all schools across the country simultaneously. We did not even do that in world war two. Our emphasis is to try to keep education open as much as we possibly can. The focus would be about managing the virus where it manifested itself. On the idea of a blanket schools lockdown, I don't think that, Department-wise, we were thinking in that way either.

I was going to go to the wider planning, if that was all right, unless you have anything else you want to finish up on Cygnus.

- Q21 **Chair:** The wider planning, and also what exact role you played in Operation Cygnus, would be very helpful to know about.

Mike Pettifer: As a Department, we were one of the Departments involved in looking at our emergency planning and response. I am afraid I was not directly involved in the Cygnus project. We could probably write to you with a bit more detail on that, if it would be helpful.

Chair: Absolutely. It would be very helpful. Thank you.

Mike Pettifer: Shall I move on to the planning?

- Q22 **Chair:** Yes. Kick off with that, and then we have further questions. Fire away, Mr Pettifer.

Mike Pettifer: In early January, we developed a situation report, which was a daily report. It was looking at what was happening with the virus and any intelligence we had on it, both internationally and in our country as well. When we moved towards the middle of March, before the closure of all the schools, we developed as a Department a target operating model. That was looking at the virus. We did not really know a great deal about



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what the impacts of that virus were going to be at the time. It was a scary climate for people, and we did not have a lot of detail.

If our staff were severely affected, we were planning for what absolute necessities needed to be kept running in the Department for our schools, colleges and other providers. We highlighted two areas. One was finance; we needed to be able to continue with all our business as usual payments, and any additional payments. The second was communications with our providers: guidance and communicating regularly on anything that we knew that we could pass on and would be useful.

Communications and finance were what we called the two lifelines. Overarching that, for the Department, we had our own business continuity. We needed to make sure that staff could access critical business systems to enable those payments. We were double and triple staffed in case of issues.

At the same time, we developed a tracker that had all of the Covid-related workstreams in one place. It also included key milestones and risks. Our planning started quite early on. The tracker was updated and reviewed daily by colleagues across the Department, so we were able at least to keep in one place everything that was happening in real time. This was quite fast paced.

Q23 Chair: The tracker sounds great. What was in the tracker? What were you tracking from January?

Mike Pettifer: We were tracking all the activities across the Department. That would have been things like writing guidance; making sure that we got our—

Q24 Chair: That is internally, but what were you tracking at school level? Were you getting reports in from LEAs, academy chains and head teachers?

Mike Pettifer: From the first day of the lockdown, we had a provider return, which was information about who was attending and how many people, and so on. We had provider returns. We set up a daily email before the lockdown. On a daily basis, providers were communicated with and given any information we had or anything we could point them to that was useful.

We were starting to collect data. We had our regional schools commissioners at that time. They were immediately focused on working with local authorities, who were giving us real-time feedback on a daily basis about any issues or concerns that were materialising with schools perhaps struggling to maintain provision, or wanting some help and support on leadership or staff capacity. Local authorities played a key role in enabling and supporting our schools and colleges to keep that service open.

Those were the sorts of things that we were monitoring externally and responding to. Internally, we had to make sure that we had a very clear



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sense of direction and focus for the Department. At the beginning of May, we produced a purpose and goals paper for the Department. That was, essentially, putting in place and formalising our key lifelines, our focus on supporting the Government's wider response, and ensuring that we were planning for future reform.

By the beginning of April, we had the tracker up with all of the workstreams in place and we were monitoring them daily. We had data inputs on attendance. We had informal input from our regional schools commissioner teams that later developed into what we called our regional education and children's teams. We were able to respond both to data and feedback. We also established a Covid helpline, which was used by providers and parents.

Q25 Chair: That is quite a lot of process. Perhaps I could go back to the permanent secretary. Have you done a full analysis of what the impact of all that planning and the first lockdown was, prior to the second lockdown?

Susan Acland-Hood: At each stage, we have tried to draw on the lessons from the previous stage to inform what we were doing at the next. We have certainly heard from schools about things like the helpline, and we have listened to what people told us about it. We have made sure that we have the right sizing of how many people we have got on that. We have built on each of the key elements of the plan: the data that is coming into us, the daily emails that are going out, and the plans we had for the guidance.

The other thing that we have tried to do at each stage, every time we possibly can and in concert with others across Government, recognising that we cannot respond unilaterally to what is a health situation, is to take advantage of everything we possibly can in looking forward and thinking at each stage about the next. What was particularly challenging last March was that there was so much that was unknown, and so many possible scenarios that you could have been looking at.

Q26 Chair: That is fair enough, up to a point. Those first few weeks last March were a challenge for everybody. After that first lockdown, and all the feedback and lessons you got, it is puzzling that there were still last-minute messages going out all the way through, including up to the January lockdown. You will remember our session just before Christmas on that.

We have had evidence very clearly from across the board that messages were flying in from different agencies—from Ofsted, the Department and other bodies. Information was very late and announcements were made on a Sunday for the Monday, and all of that sort of thing. That was still happening much later on, after that first wave, the first rush, the first challenging time in March.

What lessons were you learning? Why didn't you get better at communicating those messages to school leaders who were struggling to put together a package for their pupils?



Susan Acland-Hood: Chair, I think we did get better at it. What we struggled with was the circumstances where the notice available was just short for everybody. I will talk about that in a little bit more detail, if that is all right.

If you look at what happened between March and July, when we were planning well ahead for September, we issued guidance for school opening in September in July. We gave people notice, not just for the whole of the summer holiday but a significant chunk at the end of the summer term, for people to start making plans. We were able to do that because we had a reasonable line of sight to what we expected to happen in September. We had to make some adjustments—for example, there was an adjustment made to the guidance after the World Health Organisation changed its advice on face coverings.

What we have tried to do at every stage, as soon as we knew a new thing, was to try to make sure that we were incorporating it into what we were giving schools. There is always a trade-off in that moment between telling people as fast as possible and as soon as you know the new thing. That sometimes means that “as fast as possible” might be on a Friday night. We took the feedback from schools. You can actually see it in the numbers. The vast majority of the guidance went out 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. You can see the proportion of the guidance that did not go out 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, going down over the period.

There were moments when the situation changed so very rapidly that it was very difficult for us to give the kind of notice we would like. I think January is a very good example. I completely understand and accept how difficult it was for school leaders in January. We said one thing and then another, but the state of alert was increased on that Monday morning. We did not know ahead of time. It is not that we were not told and others in Government knew. The situation was changing so rapidly. It was not dissimilar to what you see in Germany this morning, where the rates are going up and Angela Merkel is trying to respond and having to flip back again.

Q27 Chair: Most school leaders that we have spoken to, and from whom we have received evidence, accept that anyone running an organisation like a school will have Plan A, Plan B and maybe Plan C. They needed to know that there was a possibility of a closure. Some took the planning into their own hands, but we were on the last day of term and school leaders did not know that they were going to close in January.

Obviously, there are other factors at play, but given the challenges that you have highlighted about last-minute information and so on—we have heard a lot of evidence on that—surely, if you had done some better lessons learned, you would have been able to think about warning school leaders, “If this happens, then you may need to prepare for this scenario.” Instead, you were unable to share any information with schools about what might happen in January, knowing that closure was a severe likelihood. It was not rocket science to predict that it was a very likely scenario.



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Susan Acland-Hood: With respect, I am not sure that it is as predictable as it looks in hindsight.

Q28 **Chair:** Ms Acland-Hood, we were in a meeting together on the last day of the winter term, asking what was going to happen to schools in January. There was a lot of speculation that week around what might happen because the infection rates were going up. Yes, it was not certain. I am not saying it was certain that the Government would make a decision. We did not know what the Government's decision would be, quite, but there was a very strong likelihood.

If you took options and did a survey of any school leader, the word on the ground was, "We are not going to be opening. How can we be opening? It might be that we close." Even if they were not sure that they were going to close, out there everybody knew it was a likelihood. But you were unable to give answers at that point about how to prepare for a second lockdown.

Susan Acland-Hood: What we had announced that day was that we were delaying the return of secondary pupils to introduce testing. The other thing we have to remember is that we had a contingency framework in place, jointly agreed and linked to the Department of Health's contain framework. We had a contingency framework agreed for school closures where we needed them. Indeed, that was what we deployed first in January. That was there and had been in place, and was part of the framework.

You are talking about the week we spoke. It was only at the beginning of that week that we first became properly aware of the new variant that was in circulation. That was fundamentally game changing. The way we had been operating through the autumn term had worked well with the existing variant. Indeed, even during the November lockdown when schools remained open but other things were closed, in areas that did not have the new variant we saw that rates were able to be managed with schools open. The situation was changing.

We had a contingency framework that was able to be used to start to put in place the mechanisms for closing schools in particular areas where they needed to be closed. The thing that then changed again, at the very beginning of January, was the state of alert in the NHS and the statement that the NHS was about to be overwhelmed. As soon as that was issued, we responded in a day. I appreciate that that felt uncomfortable for people, but we were able to respond quickly. It was not easy. It was difficult, but we had the things in place that enabled us to make that response under those circumstances.

Q29 **Chair:** For people on the ground—certainly the evidence has underlined that—it felt very rushed. Can I go to Mr Pettifer?

Susan Acland-Hood: I am sure they did. I think everyone felt that. Everybody involved—

Chair: Mr Pettifer, on this issue—



Susan Acland-Hood: It was rushed, but—

Q30 **Chair:** Mr Pettifer, as director of the Covid response unit you have talked a lot about the processes. As Ms Acland-Hood said, the amount of guidance issued at late notice went down, but it has been a regular concern raised with us all as constituency MPs as well as on this Committee that information came late. Do you have anything you want to add on that? What lessons have you learned about how to get guidance out to schools, heads and school leaders that is useful and accessible and not telling them something that is impossible to achieve in the timeframe that is being issued?

There was a feeling that there was lots of stuff coming at them very late in the day, and they were having to run around after 5 o'clock. Head teachers have done such long hours, without complaint, I have to say, working weekends, doing contact tracing and all of those things. Was there any concept of the practical reality on the ground of running a school and the guidance that you were sending out?

Mike Pettifer: Yes. The schools and colleges did a heroic job. There is absolutely no doubt about that. They performed amazingly across all of it in this period. They have kept the show on the road under really difficult circumstances. We are absolutely indebted and grateful to them for all the hard work they have done.

In terms of the guidance, to start with, the large academy trusts want a framework of guidance and then they will just get on with it. Then you have a small primary at the other end, where there is very little support structure in place. They can of course work with their local authorities, but they probably want a little bit more detail in the guidance.

As we erred on the side of getting information out as quickly as possible when we first started, we also erred on the side of giving them more information rather than less. That was based on the questions that were being asked on the Covid helpline, which is a useful way of us finding out that either something has not been understood properly or we have missed something out in the guidance, and we need to change it.

I do not want to give the impression that the last-minute nature was anything but unhelpful for our providers, but we were doing our level best. We moved to around 80% of our guidance being published between 9 to 5 during the week. If you look at just during the week and not at weekends, it goes up to 88%. Again, that is not perfect but—

Q31 **Chair:** It is not so much the time of day it is issued, but the timeliness. You can get it at 6 o'clock one day with a week's notice, and that is probably fine. If you get it at 5 o'clock the day before you have to do something, that is not much help, is it? Were you looking at the practical impact, not just timed deadlines, of what you were asking people to do, and how long they had to do it?



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Mike Pettifer: We absolutely were. We have reduced the size of it. We have improved the language. We have included “Sorrysts” at the start of the guidance because people have fed back frustration about having to read through the guidance again in order to find out if any changes had been made.

The high number of publications figure that is in the NAO Report is not just individual bits of guidance being published; it is updates to guidance as well. That happened quite regularly. Quite often, things related to other Government Departments or Public Health England making a change, and we had to reflect it in all sets of guidance.

We have guidance for primary schools, secondary schools, special schools and alternative provision schools. We have it for FE colleges, sixth-form colleges and universities. We have guidance for vulnerable children—

Q32 **Chair:** Mr Pettifer, I do not think anyone doubts that there is a lot that the Department does, and you have a lot to do in your job. Have you ever worked in a school at the frontline?

Mike Pettifer: I worked in a college for five years, yes, in my early career.

Q33 **Chair:** Ms Acland-Hood, have you ever worked in a school?

Susan Acland-Hood: No, I have not. I have been a school governor though, and I have worked in a local authority.

Q34 **Chair:** I am just interested. Mr McCully, have you ever worked in a school?

Andrew McCully: I have not worked in a school, but in all my career in the Department working with school leaders has been a day-by-day priority and activity.

Q35 **Chair:** Let us move on to working with school leaders very briefly. There was a lot of tension between trade unions and school leaders individually and the Department. It did not feel like a happy relationship in those early days. These are often organisations that have been working very closely with the Department. Some have had more scratchy relationships, but some have had very productive relationships with the Department. It seemed to be very “them and us”, very divided and a difficult challenge.

Mr McCully, do you recognise that characterisation? What have you learned since about how to work better with the bodies that are intermediaries between you and school leaders to help smooth the situation and make it easier for any future challenges?

Andrew McCully: In all our work with sector leaders at every level, we recognise the extraordinary work they have done. I do not want to repeat what Susan and Mike said earlier, but that has been a theme in all of our communication or exchanges with sector leaders throughout. Yes, things were moving very fast throughout the period we are talking about. Yes, there were a lot of concerns right across the sector and, of course, right



across communities. It was a difficult and scary time. Things were moving very fast and there was a lot that was unknown.

Some of the anxieties, Chair, that you are picking up, and certainly that NAO colleagues picked up in their Report, very much reflect that time of people being anxious, people wanting to do the very best by parents and pupils and always wanting to know more and get the best out of a very difficult time.

Q36 Chair: Perhaps I should have said this at the outset. There are obviously going to be specific points that we want to raise in this hearing, but we see ourselves, as a Committee, as part of an early inquiry into lessons learned in case there are any further challenges. Openness and honesty about the challenges is really helpful.

There can be defensiveness. I have no doubt that civil servants and the Department were working very hard to do what they were doing, but on the ground a lot of people felt quite unsupported. We have had other evidence, but this is in the NAO Report so I will cite it. It is from paragraph 13 on page 8 of the summary: "An informal survey of its members conducted by the Chartered College of Teaching found that 67% of respondents"—two thirds—"thought the Department's guidance on remote learning was unhelpful or very unhelpful."

It is about some understanding that there has been a problem and about what you are going to do next time, if there is a next time, to make it better, so that there is a plan to make it easier. Mr McCully, from your point of view, what have you learned that you would do differently in future that you acknowledge did not go great the first time round?

Andrew McCully: Remote learning, and the expectations for remote learning, is a very good example of where we, in the Department and the sector, have been learning throughout. It is absolutely fair to say that, in the initial closure of schools to all but the children of critical workers and vulnerable children in March, the capacity of schools and our ability to support schools in that was still developing. Understanding how best to deliver remote learning at every level was developing.

In the initial response, recognising the burdens and the extra challenges that schools had, we did not at that point seek to make explicit expectations of remote learning for schools. Throughout the early period and across the summer—particular thanks also to members from the Chartered College that you quote—we talked and consulted widely about the experience of remote learning, and so did Ofsted. In their monitoring provision across the autumn, they gathered information and best practice about how to improve remote learning.

We were at the position, come October, on the basis of earlier support and increased guidance, to be able to set a very clear expectation of what remote learning should be. We were not in a position to do that earlier in the pandemic. It has been a process of learning with the sector, increasing the amount of support as we went along, increasing the expectations and



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ensuring that the very best guidance was available. In that guidance, Ofsted was part of that.

- Q37 **Chair:** We are going to go into some more detail about remote learning and the relative role of the Department a bit later. It is important to note that things did not go brilliantly at times, and it was a big challenge. We need to understand that it did not go well, and a lot of people felt very unsupported out there.

Mr Pettifer, can I ask you about the financial side of things? Why did you limit how much money schools could claim for Covid-19 costs, and the types of costs that could be claimed? There has been some confusion out there, partly because Ministers were saying, "We'll pay whatever it takes." We recognise that it was a challenge, but it has been confusing for schools. Why did you limit what they could claim? Can you be clear what they can claim for in Covid costs?

Mike Pettifer: In terms of the limitations, we wanted to focus on the additional costs that we anticipated schools and colleges would face. We retained payments in full throughout the entire pandemic. We kept finances going to support schools and to make sure—

- Q38 **Chair:** It is about the extra costs. We know that you were continuing to pay the normal budget money into schools, but what about the additional costs they are having to claim for Covid?

Mike Pettifer: We had a school support fund. We also had the exceptional costs—the workforce fund and exceptional costs. The criteria for the exceptional costs were cleaning of premises, free school meals, and so on, and additional costs relating to Covid. The workforce fund was, by its title really, focused on staffing, and supporting genuine and legitimate challenges on staffing numbers.

- Q39 **Chair:** How easy was it for people to claim on staffing? Do you have figures for how much was claimed under the staffing element of that?

Mike Pettifer: I am afraid I do not have figures to hand as to how much was claimed on that. From the exceptional costs fund, 75% of the total pot was claimed. On the Covid workforce fund, I am not sure. I do not have it at my fingertips; apologies for that.

- Q40 **Chair:** The laptops were a separate fund, which we are going to come on to later. Obviously, some schools were under huge financial pressure, particularly small schools with small budgets, before Covid. How are you making sure that schools that were already facing financial difficulties, and have now had to deal with Covid and some of the costs of Covid, are going to be supported and not faced with more troubles as a result?

Mike Pettifer: We have significant amounts of additional funding going into the system; £2.6 billion has gone into it in this academic year. That goes up to £4.8 billion in the following academic year. By 2022-23, it is £7.1 billion. The core funding is increasing significantly during this period.



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- Q41 **Chair:** But that is on the top of 10 years of reductions. We have to nail this. This is not more money going in than ever before. It is more money going in after a series of 10 years of reductions in funding. That does not bring it up to the level that it was before.

Mr Pettifer, before I go to the permanent secretary, I asked why you limited the amount or type of money that schools could claim under the Covid fund. Can you explain why you limited it?

Mike Pettifer: Rather than limit it, we had a set of criteria that we thought would be the criteria by which we would be able to assess and pay the payments.

- Q42 **Chair:** Are you content that those criteria were right? Have you thought about revisiting those?

Mike Pettifer: They have been largely right. The additional costs for schools have been around cleaning, free school meals and additional Covid-secure arrangements on their premises. It is about the response to Covid, for that particular fund.

- Q43 **Chair:** We are going to come to catch-up learning later. I will leave it there for now, but I think colleagues will pick up on why it was limited so narrowly.

Permanent secretary, I want to ask you about the financial situation for schools that are struggling now because they have had challenges over the years, and then Covid to deal with.

Susan Acland-Hood: Obviously, in normal times and in difficult times we keep a very close eye on the financial situation of schools and try to make sure that we are supporting them. The last published data, which was published in February, relates principally to 2019-20, and shows a very slight shrinking in the total net reserves of the maintained sector, but there are still whole total net reserves of around £1.5 billion. In the academy sector, 94% of academy trusts were in a cumulative surplus or a zero balance. About 7% of them had surpluses over £3 million. The total cash held by academy trusts is about £4.2 billion, which is up from the previous year.

Clearly, in any picture like that, you have an average that looks reasonably healthy. In our monitoring for this year—we do not have figures for this year to give yet—we are not seeing a significant shift in that overall position of reasonable financial health—

- Q44 **Chair:** We have to be a bit careful about pointing to reserves and saying that means schools are healthy. Sometimes those reserves are held for very specific capital plans, which are very necessary. Not every school can just dip into its reserves to backfill. You are responsible for the overall financial health of the sector. Is that something you are alert to?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, of course. I recognise that, but I think it is still the case that, if you were seeing a very significant shift in overall financial



health, you might see that average shift. What we are doing is keeping an eye both on the average position and on the individual circumstances of schools that are in difficulty. We continue to work on that. We have a different relationship though the ESFA with academies than we do with maintained schools, but we will keep supporting schools that find themselves in serious financial difficulties. We are keeping an eye on the impact of the pandemic. As I say, at the moment I am not—

- Q45 **Chair:** So, supporting schools in serious financial difficulties. Does that mean that, if necessary, there may be an additional short-term pot of money? I am caveating what you are saying because I assume you do not mean permanently, because Departments never give away permanent money. It is just extra money to get schools over the challenge of the next few months.

Susan Acland-Hood: Our starting point for schools in serious financial difficulties is not just to give them an extra pot of money, but to work with them to understand what the causes of the financial difficulty are and try to get them to a sustainable financial position. I think that would still be our starting point before we started giving out money. We have an exceptional costs fund. We have had the workforce fund. We are keeping a very close eye out.

It is right for taxpayers to expect us to start by working with the schools to understand the cause of the financial trouble, and try to make sure that they can get into a sustainable place. As I say, we are not seeing very large numbers of schools seeing their financial position radically deteriorate at the moment.

Chair: This Committee, as you know, looks at the financial sustainability of the sector regularly. I will leave that there for now, much as I am tempted to go down that particular route.

- Q46 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Ms Acland-Hood, why did the DFE not set out some basic expectations for schools' provision during the summer term?

Susan Acland-Hood: Mr McCully has spoken a little bit about this. There was a clear trade-off. We were asking schools to move very rapidly to do something that they had not done before. We asked them to remain open for vulnerable children and children of key workers, but to close to other children. We were also asking them to stay open over the Easter holidays to help to support key worker children.

As we have all said, the response that the sector has made in this pandemic has been truly fantastic. We had teachers and head teachers who were working in unprecedented circumstances to try to set up an entirely new way of doing things. Under those circumstances, first, our judgment was that it was right to try to relieve pressure and ask less, not more in that moment.



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Secondly, as Mr McCully said, we were still learning, along with the sector, about what good would look like under those circumstances. I think it would have been a challenge to set out expectations that were well founded at that moment.

This is one place, though, where I think it is hard to remember back. We had the national moment of reflection this week, and we have all been thinking back to how we were feeling this time last year and what it was like. We have to remember that initially people were hoping that this was an intervention that would be short. One of my reflections is that if we had understood at the time how long it was likely to go on, and the duration of the disruption, we might have done something different in the expectations we set out.

In that moment, what we wanted to do was to make sure there was provision for the vulnerable and key worker children; that schools could look after people during the Easter holiday; and that they could manage this huge change. We also had lots of people who were ill. We did not even really know at that point what we know now about the differential impact and the health and transmissibility risks for children and adults.

We were trying to relieve pressure at a critical moment rather than add requirements, but that is one area where I absolutely would say that if we had been able to see the future more clearly than we did, we might have done something different. One of my reflections, and one of the things we are trying to do in the Department at the moment, is to make—

Q47 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: We all have degrees in hindsight, and we would all do something different. Let's focus on what the NAO Report says. In paragraph 16, it says: "A survey by the National Foundation for Educational Research in May 2020 found that less than half of schools reported teaching those pupils attending school the same curriculum content as was being sent out to those learning remotely; 29% of primary school leaders reported their main approach was extra-curricular activities such as arts, crafts or games, compared with 7% of secondary schools." That was a pretty unsatisfactory state of affairs, even at the time, wasn't it?

Susan Acland-Hood: Again, we have school leaders under difficult circumstances trying to manage both the provision of packs for learning for children who are out of school and supporting—

Chair: Ms Acland-Hood, could you lean into your microphone a bit more? It is a bit scratchy.

Susan Acland-Hood: I am sorry; I am not normally too quiet.

Q48 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: We all understand the difficult circumstances, but those are basic facts. You must have known the same facts. It is extraordinarily unsatisfactory, is it not? The whole Report basically says that those in the most deprived areas, the most deprived schools and the most deprived children were the ones who suffered the



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most. If they were only receiving unsatisfactory remote learning, that is a really big cause for concern that your Department should have acted quicker on, shouldn't it?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think you highlight two things. One is the quality of the remote education and the other is what was provided for the vulnerable and key worker children who were in school. I do not want to denigrate extra-curricular provision. I think it can sometimes be very valuable, particularly for children who are having their lives fundamentally disrupted, but I agree; I think I have said that this is one of the areas where, in hindsight, I would have done something different.

What we tried to do was to learn from that. When that became clear, we were starting, as Mr McCully set out, to work with schools and with Ofsted to try to understand what good-quality remote learning looks like, and then to build that into the guidance that we set for the next period. When you look at what happened during the second national lockdown from January, the quality of the remote learning that children received during this period—because we, the schools, Ofsted and everybody in the system had given themselves over to intently learning from the first period—was qualitatively completely different. It was fantastic—

Q49 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Ms Acland-Hood, can we please perhaps try and keep the answers a little bit more concise, otherwise we are never going to get through this whole Report? The information that I have just quoted was in May. Why did it take until October for the Department to put a legal duty on schools to provide remote learning to children who were legally obliged to be at home?

Susan Acland-Hood: There were conversations going on with the sector about whether or not we would put that legal duty on schools from a much earlier period. We had set out expectations about remote learning in the July guidance that I mentioned earlier for school return in September. It was not that there were no expectations; it was that they did not have legal force around them.

As the Secretary of State looked at the circumstances over the autumn term, and thought about what might be to come, he reached the conclusion that it was important that those expectations were backed by a legal duty. That is why he put that in place in October.

Q50 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: To what extent was the remote education that schools offered in the early months of this year better than what happened last year? Some of the paucity of what I have just quoted happened last year. How did you improve on it this year?

Susan Acland-Hood: It was undoubtedly significantly better. It was better for several reasons. I should mention, of course, that there were some things we did very early on that have built and grown. We supported the Oak National Academy work, although, importantly, it was very much in partnership with sector-led activity. It has had good responses throughout, and we were building that over the whole course of the period.



We had a great deal in place relatively quickly, but we have continued to build with Oak the kind of provision that is available for coverage of the curriculum.

In terms of what happened this lockdown, there were several things that had moved on. First, we had significantly expanded the provision of laptops and devices. We had set those expectations—

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: We will come on to laptops in a minute.

Susan Acland-Hood: We had set the expectations that you have described, which we described in outline and then gave legal backing in October. We set out clearer expectations on the number of hours we were expecting to be taught, not necessarily through live lessons. We had, as Mr McCully has talked about, the work that Ofsted had been doing to look at what good-quality remote learning looks like. They published a report on that in January, which both reflected better provision and has helped to further improve the provision. Our expectations, for example, included asking schools to have a single, coherent platform for delivering their remote education.

Fundamentally, it was not all about work that was done in the Department. It was about a partnership with the sector. It was also about the way schools picked up and learned from one another. We tried to use the principle of peer-to-peer learning. We had a set of EdTech demonstrator schools, which were extremely good users of technology. They spread their experience and expertise. They touched some 4,000 schools through the work that they were doing to help support others. It was building on the principle that people learn well from the experiences of others.

In terms of the results, we can see in Ofsted's reporting, and indeed in the feedback that we get from parents and from schools, that during the second lockdown there was far and away more activity. It was better quality and more consistent.

Q51 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I am going to ask a brisk question, and I would be grateful for a brisk reply. Why did so few vulnerable children attend school between 23 March, when they were closed, and late May?

Susan Acland-Hood: I am proud that we kept schools open for vulnerable children. It was important that we did that. Not every country in the world did that. Again, I go back to the experience that people were having at the time. People were extremely anxious. It was a challenge. There was an incredibly strong message going out to stay at home, and people took that message seriously. People were making individual choices about attendance. The critically important thing was that school was available for the children who needed to be there, and we saw attendance of vulnerable children going up between March and July.

Secondly, we were supporting vulnerable children whether they were in school or not. The regional education and children's teams that Mike



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Pettifer described were there, and were helping to try to stay in contact with and support vulnerable children, even if they were not in school.

Q52 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: What evidence do you have about the hidden harm that children may have suffered last spring and summer?

Susan Acland-Hood: This is something that we take incredibly seriously. A lot of people were expecting to see a huge increase in social care referrals when schools returned in September. One of the things that we have been working on very closely with practice leads across the social care system is that we did not see the spike in referrals that people were expecting. That obviously raises concern about whether there is hidden harm from people who are not in contact with the system.

Increasingly, though, people are asking questions about whether there were some positive effects for some families of the deeper family contact that some had. What we are trying to do is work really closely with social care sector colleagues to understand that.

We put in place a significant amount of funding to charitable organisations to help stay in contact with children, to give more routes for referral and to try to make sure that people could get in touch if they needed to. We obviously worked on and monitored very closely the amount of contact that social workers were having with children known to social services.

Q53 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The Report says at paragraph 20 on page 11 that attendance at remote learning varied between five and two hours a day; five in the IFS study and two hours, Department. I am not quite sure why there is a difference, but importantly it said that "higher-income families spent 30% more time on remote learning" than the poorest, and that this would represent a gap, by the end of the summer, of 15 full days lost for those in the poorest sector. How are we going to catch up for some of the poorest and most deprived, those with special needs and those with EHCPs? Going forward, how are we going to help those vulnerable children to catch up with their learning?

Susan Acland-Hood: We are doing a set of things that take in a number of dimensions of that. You are right to identify differential learning as the biggest risk, and the one that we need to attend to the most, although Ofsted has identified clearly that, for the people who have lost most through the pandemic, there is definitely a deprivation influence, but you also see children with low prior attainment who have struggled to access remote learning. That is not perfectly correlated with deprivation, so it is important that schools are able to do some quite granular targeting of the work.

There are some key things that we are doing. First, we are trying to make sure that we have children in school. We are making sure that we look at attendance figures as schools come back. I am very proud of and impressed by the work that the sector has done. We have very high attendance figures as schools have returned from 8 March, including for



children with education health and care plans and those with a social worker.

The second thing is to make available targeted support for the children who need it most, which is the investment you have seen through the catch-up premium that we have encouraged schools to use to focus work on the children who most need support. That money has gone out to schools this year—£650 million, the largest chunk of the catch-up funding that was announced last summer. You have the national—

Q54 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Thank you; that gives us a flavour.

We know that referrals to children's social services were down during the pandemic when children were, sadly, locked up, apart from those of key workers. Can you tell us what has happened to referrals of children to social services since November?

Susan Acland-Hood: As I said, there was a significant drop in referrals, and many people were expecting that we would see a spike in referrals in September when schools came back. It has not particularly spiked. The drop has softened a little bit. Year on year, we are still down about 10% in referral rates. They have recovered a bit, but we have not seen a spike.

Q55 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: There is probably a pent-up problem in children's mental health, among other problems. What can you, as a Department, do to help schools with that?

Susan Acland-Hood: I might turn to Mr McCully on this in a minute. We put in place a number of sources of support for children's mental health during the lockdown period. Some of this, of course, is joint with our colleagues in the Department for Health.

There is the wellbeing for education return programme that we set up for September. It funds expert training for every local authority area to support education staff to respond to the emotional and mental health pressures that we know some children and young people have felt as a result of Covid-19. Over 90% of local authority areas have reported that they are delivering additional training and support in local schools, and in further education providers. We must remember the college sector, which has also done the most fantastic job through this pandemic.

We have consistently signposted Public Health England's advice and guidance for parents and professionals. Their Every Mind Matters and Rise Above platforms were both adapted for the context of the pandemic. We have also put in place some specific support for school leaders. Again, if you want more detail, Mr McCully can come in on that.

Chair: We will certainly come to it. Although it sounds great, when you divide it by the number of schools, it is spread very thinly. We will be coming to that later. I am going to turn to Shaun Bailey on the issue of disadvantaged children.

Q56 Shaun Bailey: Good morning, Ms Acland-Hood. Are you confident that the



Department's definition of a vulnerable child is still relevant, given what we have experienced over the last 12 months?

Susan Acland-Hood: The definition of vulnerable children that we use to decide who can access a school place contains some elements that are fixed. In other words, we have said that children with an educational health and care plan and children with a social worker should be treated as vulnerable. We also had an important third category: students that the school otherwise considered vulnerable. It was really important to give that flexibility. Without that, I do not think the definition would have stood the test.

That allowed schools, who know their children very well, to understand and to work with parents as well, to make sure that places could be made available to the children they knew would suffer if they were not able to access face-to-face education. It allowed them to take into account other circumstances in the home and things like how they knew a child would manage, including children who might have mental health difficulty if they were not able to come into school. I think that that discretion given to schools, who know their children best, was a really important part of the definition of vulnerable children. If we are capturing lessons learned, I think that is one of the things we did that was right and that you would do again under similar circumstances.

Q57 Shaun Bailey: Thank you for that. I have been speaking to my local schools, and one in particular that is in a catchment area defined as deprived. First of all, how were you ensuring that schools were empowered to make those decisions? The feedback I have had is that they could not make those decisions and they were not given guidance as to how to make that discretionary call.

If we are talking about deprivation in this context as well, why weren't things such as parents' precarious employment situation and parents on zero-hours contracts—those vulnerabilities—also factored in? Certainly, from my reading, that does not appear to have been the case. In a community like mine, that was one of the biggest vulnerabilities that seems to have had an impact. Could you talk through that as well, please, Ms Acland-Hood?

Susan Acland-Hood: We said in the guidance that there was discretion for schools to act on other vulnerabilities. There is something I am happy to take away on whether we could have been even clearer that schools absolutely had that discretion and could do that. We saw many schools take advantage of that. I am quite happy, if there are particular schools that did not feel as though they could do that, to have a look at why that was, and what we could do to help make sure that people felt empowered to make those decisions.

Q58 Shaun Bailey: As I say, certainly the feedback I have had from local schools is that it was not there.

Can I turn to the point on laptop delivery? I know this has been covered,



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but how were you basing those decisions? The example I have been given is that a family of seven, which is quite common in some of the more deprived parts of my constituency, or multi-generational families, were getting one device. They had a rota where children were only able to do their work at particular times. Did the Department count that in at all? How was that operating? The feedback from my local schools and stakeholders is that that does not seem to have been a thought process that was added into the delivery.

Susan Acland-Hood: I am happy to talk a bit about what we did on laptops. It very much went in stages. Again, my own view is that this is one of those things where we started off thinking that the disruption might be of short duration. We were trying to get children back into school as fast as we possibly could. The starting point was identifying a small group of children right at the high end of the risk spectrum—looked-after children—and focusing on years 10 and 12, those who were going to face exams in the following year. That was the focus for the summer term's laptop distribution, which was 220,000 laptops.

After that, we started on laptop distribution that was focused on trying to make sure that schools that were disrupted during the autumn term had enough laptops to make provision for children so that they could do remote learning for short periods while they were off. The allocations for that were based on children on free school meals, but the overall allocation took account of the fact that there were around 3 million devices already out in the system.

What was difficult to do was to match the allocations to where the devices already out in the system were. That was not a piece of information that we had collected in the past from schools, so we were trying to assess that. We did not do a distribution based on, for example, one per family. Typically, that was happening where a school had had an allocation, if they had no devices in school previously, that was lower than their number of free school meals children, and they were working out how to manage that.

That initial set of allocations, which took account of the number of devices already in the system, added up to some 750,000. We said we would distribute the first half million of those during the autumn term, and we did. We slightly exceeded that. Then we ordered enough so that schools could top up if their individual allocation was not enough. That was the basis, along with the addition of FE colleges, of the 1.3 million that we have now said we will distribute. We have now distributed 1.26 million of the 1.3 million.

The principal reason why we have not distributed 1.3 million is that we are coming to the end of schools ordering, because they are effectively saying that they now have enough devices in school to reflect their number of free school meals children. Effectively, we have filled the gap that was there. The data we had did not allow us to perfectly match the number of devices already in the system with the places where they were.



Q59 Shaun Bailey: That raises a number of concerns for me. How are you mapping deprivation? You have talked about free school meals, but there are other elements. Surely, you are trying to granulate that data further.

The point I am trying to get across, Chair, is that there are specific needs. It just sounds a bit like the Department has taken a bit of a blanket approach. It is not entirely blanket—I concede that point—but surely there is a more granulated way to do it. Surely, that is not right for kids in families of eight or nine—this is the feedback from local schools. I have had the safeguarding leads tell me this. It is happening on the ground.

How are you ensuring that the data is a lot more granular, not just in this, now? Surely, your Department is responsible for ensuring that these children get a life chance in the future. How are you ensuring, when you tailor your support packages for children in communities like mine, that it is actually being done with the granulated data that is needed, Ms Acland-Hood? Can you just talk through that? Surely there must be a better way to do it.

Susan Acland-Hood: The starting point was a system in which we funded schools through their core funding to operate as they would operate, and this was one of the things that we had seen as a devolved responsibility. In other words, schools that wanted to take a more technology-based approach would use their core funding to buy technology. That was not something we sought to control or manage from the Department.

The challenge was that, when the pandemic hit, it was clearly right that the Department intervened to try to make sure that we rapidly got a much larger supply of devices. We could have left it to schools and provided money rather than providing devices, but there was a huge challenge of supply on the international market, and we knew that we would be able to, and we did, because of the scale of purchasing, help command the supply and get decent prices. It meant that we were trying to layer that on top of the system, and we have not typically taken that directive an approach.

There is a question for us to reflect on for the future. We want to make sure that the devices we put into the system are well used in the future. We want to learn from the pandemic. We want to make sure that we are building on what we and everybody in the system has learned about remote learning. I would be a bit cautious about assuming that that means we go to a much more dirigiste and centrally directed approach for ever.

There are some things that we have done during the course of the pandemic that we want to learn from, where we think, "That was good and we want to build on it and do more of it." There are other things where we need to stop and pause and ask ourselves if that is the sort of thing you do during a pandemic because it is a well-respected principle of crisis management that you might move to more centralised and directive activity under those circumstances. We have to be careful that we do not take that directive approach for ever as a default.

Chair: I do not think anyone is expecting that.



Q60 Shaun Bailey: I hear what you are saying, but I am focusing specifically on deprived areas. I am asking ultimately how those decisions were made and how the approach, particularly to the intervention, was taken. The point I advanced to you is that it appears to me, and it appears to my teachers on the ground, that there was somewhat of a broad-brush approach to how this was done.

You have explained somewhat the data and the rationale used, and I have heard that, but it does not seem that that has been effective because we have had these gaps. We have had particularly large families who have kids on a rota to do their schoolwork. Given, as I said before, the responsibility your Department has in tackling deprivation and inequalities in life chances, how are you ensuring that from this pandemic that data is bang on, because it is so important that we get this right? I hear what you are saying about the broad-brush scheme, and that is noted, but talk me through the data analysis a bit more. How are you doing this?

Susan Acland-Hood: In terms of making sure that we have a good picture of deprivation in the system and can target, if there is a family of seven and all of them are on free school meals, we have data that shows us all of those children separately. It does not aggregate. If you have schools where there are still large numbers of children who are sharing devices, by all means send me the details, because it is absolutely open to them to order new devices. It is still open to ordering. They can absolutely get more now.

The challenge was getting them all out as fast as we all would have liked when we were working incredibly hard to get laptops in a global supply situation where everybody wanted laptops. Genuinely, the pace over the autumn term was as fast as we could make it, but we were absolutely up against global supply constraints. That governed the fact that we could not get everything out as fast as we wanted.

Chair: We will come back on some of this as well.

Q61 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Ms Acland-Hood, can we try to get out of this hearing what the Department's plan is for remote IT learning in future? It is all very well chucking all these computers out to everybody, but they will need replacing. I am also very concerned, given the divide between deprived children and non-deprived children, about whether the broadband signal is strong enough in some of these areas to support some of the computers. What is the Department's plan for the future?

Susan Acland-Hood: I might bring in Mr McCully on this as well. First, I completely recognise the point about making sure that broadband infrastructure is there for schools, and that has certainly been something that our digital and data team in the Department has been working on hard with colleagues in DCMS. We have tried to make sure that we have mechanisms to help—for example, through the free data offer that we made with mobile network operators for families who needed it. You are absolutely right. It is imperative that we all collectively keep working to try



to get the overall infrastructure right. DCMS colleagues are working on that for every purpose, not just for schools. We have a strong relationship with them to identify schools that still do not have the broadband connection that you would want for them to be able to operate well. There are still too many. That is right.

The second part of the question was about our plan for the future of remote education. What we have learned through this pandemic is that there is an appetite for support from the Department. As I said in answer to the last question, we need to think carefully about the balance between us doing things centrally and getting back to a situation where we are giving back a little bit more control and autonomy to schools to make choices.

We have seen enough, and we have learned enough now, to know that things like our EdTech demonstrator pilots, which, effectively, help build knowledge about what good quality looks like in remote education, are something we absolutely want to sustain and build on going forward. Making sure that we are putting information into the system and helping people to understand what good-quality education looks like, very parallel to the way we do—

Q62 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am getting from you, Ms Acland-Hood, as I have for a lot of the questions throughout this hearing, a lot of worthy aspiration but very little actual substance. Can you tell us something of substance? What is your Department's plan for IT remote learning going forward? I do not mind whether you do it or whether Mr McCully does or who does. Could we get it from one of you, please?

Susan Acland-Hood: The Department's plan for remote education is to make sure that, as we do in other aspects of education, we are supporting the sector with good-quality guidance and information about what good looks like, and making sure that we are investing to give them the tools and capabilities to do it well. We are working across Government to make sure that the infrastructure is in place to allow schools to operate really well using digital technology.

Q63 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Mr McCully, do you have anything further to add?

Andrew McCully: Going back to Mr Bailey's comments, understanding the level of need within schools will help to determine future spending plans as well. We are just about to enter a further spending review period, and the sort of information that we have been able to secure through the experience that the permanent secretary has talked about is vital for the sorts of plans that we make through the spending review.

Q64 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I fail to get what the Department's future plans are for IT and remote learning. Can you answer a very simple question? What is going to happen to the existing equipment, the existing computers and routers that have been sent out? Will those children be able to keep them?



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Andrew McCully: The devices are owned by the schools or the local authorities and remain the property of the schools and local authorities. Schools, I am sure, will be making different decisions about taking some devices and making sure that they are targeted towards real need. It is the schools' responsibility, and the schools own the devices. It is not the Department. We have made sure that schools can own the devices.

Q65 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Will it be up to the schools to make sure they are maintained and replaced?

Andrew McCully: The schools now own the devices. We have given the schools the devices.

Chair: Mr McCully, have you planned in obsolescence?

Q66 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** We know that IT equipment these days does not last very long. Who is going to replace them?

Andrew McCully: This is a substantial offer to schools. We have put £400 million into schools. Chair, you rightly focused us on lessons learned throughout this discussion. One of the lessons is the centrality of remote provision, and that centrality linked in future to how schools use their core budgets. The sorts of things we have talked about today such as the setting of clear expectations within curriculum requirements for the quality of remote provision are the sorts of things that schools will need to reflect in how they use their core budgets in future. In terms of obsolescence, schools will make decisions about how to maintain this provision through the use of their core funds.

Q67 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Ms Acland-Hood, as the Chair said at the beginning, we do not want to go over the free school meals debacle, but a Department negotiating with Edenred, negotiating with EEF over the project for tutoring partnerships and negotiating with Computershare seems to have significant flaws about value for money. Do you accept that the Department needs a stronger commercial negotiating team to negotiate these big projects that involve a lot of taxpayers' money, given the NAO's worries about value for money, particularly with the Computershare project?

Susan Acland-Hood: I am not sure I would accept that. We had some very difficult choices at the outset, which were, broadly speaking, around the amount of process we could go through and the amount of time we had available. In each case, we tried to make sure that we were going through a good quality process. Computacenter was part of a framework, and we were able to make sure, through that framework, that we had good quality. We only went to them, through that rapid framework, for the very first stage of the procurement. After that, we did full procurement processes at each stage.

I will happily talk further to the NAO about any concerns they may have, but we are quite pleased with the value for money that we got from the programme. The cost per device is good. I think the Department did a good



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job on that. Our commercial colleagues were closely involved, as well as Crown Commercial Service colleagues.

Q68 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Sorry, I got the name wrong; it was Computacenter's capacity to deliver. I accept there was a world market in demand for laptops. Nevertheless, there are questions about their capacity to deliver. There are certainly questions about the EEF contract with tuition partners. It did not even specify what commission they were getting.

This really does, on top of the questions that I am asking you about Edenred and free school meals, beg questions about your Department's ability to negotiate big commercial contracts. I will ask you again. Do you need to strengthen your commercial contracting negotiation within your Department? It is a fairly simple question.

Susan Acland-Hood: Commercial colleagues have done a good job through the pandemic. If you ask a permanent secretary whether they want to strengthen any function in their Department, they would be an idiot not to say yes. I always want to strengthen every function in my Department. My whole job is to try to strengthen everything that we do as much as we possibly can.

I do not think it would be fair to our commercial colleagues to suggest this. They were under difficult circumstances. They made some arrangements that allowed us to act very quickly, and as rapidly as possible, to get us into a strong position. EEF have a very strong track record. They delivered a pilot tutoring programme that had extremely good results. They have led an evaluation of tutoring programmes in the past that show between three and five months' progress for the children taking part. That is a very strong effect—

Q69 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Nobody is criticising EEF, but to negotiate a contract with them when you do not even know what commission they will get strikes me as somebody who is not really on the ball negotiating these things properly commercially on behalf of the taxpayer.

Susan Acland-Hood: The way that we could get EEF to start at the pace that allowed us to make provision this year was through a grant variation. In a grant variation, there is a limit to what you are able to do. Even if I had had the most extraordinary commercial minds in the land on this, you cannot add such provisions through a grant variation mechanism. To address that, we are now tendering for the next stage of the national tutoring programme. That tender is live now and is out. It includes all the provisions that you would expect to see, because it is a contract and not a grant variation.

For EEF, we did a grant variation. For the Teach First element of the NTP, we did a variation to contract that allowed a little bit more flexibility. We used absolutely everything we could within the mechanisms that were available to us. It would not have been possible to get tutoring in place for children this year by going through another means. We were striking a balance to be able to get the provision up and running when it was needed.



As soon as we were able to, we have been contracting for the next year's operation.

Q70 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Can I go back to children with SEND and remote learning? Paragraph 2.31, page 35, of the Report: "Representative groups told us that remote learning had been especially difficult for children with SEND. Many children with complex needs struggled because they did not have at home the IT and other specialist equipment they would normally use at school." That is surely deeply disturbing. It comes back to the general tenor of the Report, that the most deprived and most needy children were not supported well enough during this pandemic.

Susan Acland-Hood: There are a couple of things to say on that. That is of course why children with an education, health and care plan were prioritised for face-to-face attendance at school. We knew that remote provision, particularly for children in some circumstances, would be difficult. Like everything, it is a very variable picture. We have also seen some children with particular needs, including some children who are on the autistic spectrum, who have benefited from a different way of learning. It is not all children on the autistic spectrum; it is a very differentiated picture. We tried to make sure that children with SEND had face-to-face learning available wherever that was possible. With some children, because of their health conditions, it was difficult to take up.

We have tried to work with special school providers in the same way we have with others, to learn as much as we possibly can about what is effective in remote learning. It is very challenging. None of us is in a position where we would have moved to remote learning as a matter of choice, because we know that it does not work as well for some children as others. Children with SEND were prioritised for laptops. Every child with an EHCP had a risk assessment with the provider to determine where they could best learn, to help make sure that we were trying to put those children in the right place. I completely appreciate that for those children this has been a very difficult time.

Q71 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Precisely. That is the whole tenor of these questions. It is not to try to catch your Department out. It is to try to make sure that there are proper lessons learned, so that if we get into this situation for some other pandemic or something else that happens, the Department and the country is properly prepared.

On that question, paragraph 3.5 of the NAO Report, page 38, talks about the regional differences: "Interim findings from the Department's research also showed a regional and socio-economic variation in the extent of estimated lost learning." For example, "the North East lost 2.4 months and 2.3 months of progress in reading respectively, compared with...1.2 in the South East." Can you first of all explain why there was that regional variation and, secondly, what you are going to do about it?

Susan Acland-Hood: There is still more work to be done on understanding every detail of why that regional variation took place. We



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have the Renaissance Learning findings from the beginning of autumn. We are just starting to look—not yet published—at the Renaissance Learning findings from the end of the autumn term, which looked at how far children caught up during the autumn term. In all of that, there are differences based on deprivation and things like previous prior attainment, and we see regional variations. Some of the regional variation is explained by other factors; some of it is explained, for example, by deprivation.

We know that, historically, we have had challenges with the quality of education in some regions. Where schools struggle in normal times, we know that they will have struggled during the pandemic as well. This brings us back to the set of things that we need to do that are not just about learning lessons from the pandemic. I completely accept it. You are entirely right. I see this process and the NAO Report process as an incredibly important part of our learning as well.

Some of it is about absolutely reinforcing the things that we do in normal times to try to improve the quality of education, particularly in places where we know we have persistent challenges. The regions that have struggled have been those where we have seen persistent challenge over time with the quality of education.

Q72 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Ms Acland-Hood, I hesitate to ask this question because I know it could elicit a long answer. Can you try to keep it fairly pithy? Given the answer that you have just given about deprivation and the clear difference of attainment sadly caused by the pandemic, can you be absolutely confident that the funds you have given for catch-up, monitoring, summer schools and so on will help to close the attainment gap that has arisen? I am very worried about it.

Susan Acland-Hood: I am absolutely determined that they should, and we are doing everything we possibly can to try to focus them in a way that will help that to happen. I recognise you do not want a long answer. We are trying to focus, for example, the academic part of the tutoring programme, which puts somebody embedded in a school, only in schools that have high numbers of free school meals pupils.

Last year's catch-up premium was organised per head. Next year's recovery premium will be organised per pupil premium pupil. In other words, it will be explicitly targeted at deprivation. We have done some work, for example, through our regional schools commissioners to focus on the areas where we have seen the biggest challenges, helping to encourage, for example, take-up of the national tutoring programme.

Q73 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: In terms of summer catch-up classes, what discussions have you had with teachers, unions, the tutor monitoring programme and others that they are prepared, if necessary, to work extra time in the summer when they would not normally be working, and possibly suffer a loss of income because they have been tutoring one to one, but they now have to be tutoring groups? What discussions have you had, and what assurance can you give this Committee that the summer catch-up



programmes will really be effective?

Susan Acland-Hood: The summer schools provision is funding going to secondary schools. We have encouraged them to target it on year 7, although we have given schools flexibility to decide how to spend it. We have been talking to teacher union colleagues and other partners and direct to schools about their intent. We have not made it a requirement. We want to stick to the schools leading their own recovery thinking about what will work best for their pupils. We have seen success with similar programmes in the past. We had pupil premium-focused summer schools a couple of years ago, which saw take-up from schools and really good take-up from pupils. We expect to see a similar pattern this summer.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Thank you, Ms Acland-Hood.

Q74 **Olivia Blake:** I have two very quick yes/no follow-up questions for Ms Acland-Hood. Do you agree that there has been a huge safeguarding issue during this pandemic?

Susan Acland-Hood: We have done everything we possibly can working with local authorities, but I think—

Chair: We cannot hear you at all, Ms Acland-Hood. Your mic has disappeared.

Susan Acland-Hood: Sorry, is that any better?

Chair: Yes, a bit better.

Susan Acland-Hood: I am sorry about that.

We are working hard with children's social care partners, with local authorities and others because we recognise that there are real safeguarding challenges. At any time when circumstances change radically around children in difficulty, we worry about safeguarding.

Q75 **Olivia Blake:** Will core funding now be increased to cover individual laptops and extra IT support?

Susan Acland-Hood: We have massively increased the core schools budget going forward. It is quite an important principle that, wherever we possibly can, we give schools discretion about how the money is used.

Q76 **Olivia Blake:** Moving back to SEND, there were some reports of children with EHC plans having the assessments that you mentioned, but their families were not involved in the risk assessment. What oversight did your Department have of that, and how many of those risk assessments placed children at home?

Susan Acland-Hood: On EHC plans, our Department works closely with local authorities, which take the lead on that aspect of the system. We would have done the oversight through local authorities, rather than doing it directly from the Department. I am afraid I do not know the number. I will have to write to the Committee with that.



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Olivia Blake: Thank you, I appreciate that. Could you give some insight as to why some schools felt they were unable to offer spaces to children with EHC plans? How did that vary region to region and school type to school type?

Susan Acland-Hood: The situation changed over the course of the pandemic. As an example, EHCP attendance moved from about 5% in March to 27% in June, and we saw significantly higher attendance during January. In January, we were getting up towards more like 37% of children with an ECHP in attendance. Since the March reopening, we are up to 85%. We have seen that shift a great deal over the course of the pandemic.

There were some very specific reasons why some schools had difficulty with children's attendance. There are some children who need very specific medical procedures around which there were specific identified risks, and that was something we worked on very closely with authorities and individuals. We certainly saw regional and school-to-school variation, and we can think about that in lessons to learn for the future.

Schools' levels of confidence varied in how they were approaching this. You can see it across different types of settings. There is something that we might want to do in the future about trying to make sure that we find ways of giving extra advice and support to schools in making those judgments.

Q77 **Olivia Blake:** Are there any lessons on the support for SEND and disadvantaged children that you would take into account in planning for future pandemics at this point?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is a bit like the difference we saw between the first lockdown and the second lockdown in terms of children's attendance. We would think really hard about messaging and support on school attendance. There is the creation of the regional education and children's teams, which, effectively, bring together people to wrap around the most vulnerable children. We had tremendous support for those.

For example, having suspended Ofsted inspections, several hundred colleagues came across from Ofsted to staff those teams and help give advice. That was good and is something we want to bake into our planning for response, and to think about in our organisation in normal times as well.

There are also some things that we could do jointly with the Department of Health and Social Care, because some of these things relate to specific medical risks. There is a set of things that we have done jointly with the Department of Health and Social Care—for example, the identification of clinically extremely vulnerable children. I would like to look at that as we go forward jointly with them.

Q78 **Olivia Blake:** Mr McCully, what actions did you take to help children with SEND to learn from home?



Andrew McCully: I fear I am going to repeat the comments from the permanent secretary. Many children with SEND face real difficulties in remote education. That is why it is so important to enable the return to school for children with SEND; there are inherent difficulties in using remote provision within schools.

One of the key lessons has been, as the permanent secretary said, about the messaging, the support for parents and the confidence of parents for their children to be in school in such circumstances. That is a key lesson that we have learned. You will see from the figures the permanent secretary mentioned earlier that the movement of children, especially with EHCPs, changed significantly over the different openings of schools.

Q79 **Olivia Blake:** What extra support was put in place for children with SEND who do not have EHC plans?

Andrew McCully: I reflected in one of my earlier answers how much schools and the Department learned over the year, in answer to Mr Clifton-Brown's question. Schools were still developing their provision. We are learning all the time. That is certainly the case for children with special educational needs. Schools were not bound by just the limits of EHC plans for targeting their provision. They were also targeting their provision at children with wider social and educational needs. Our guidance and the experience of schools points back to the best place for excellent provision being face-to-face education. That is why the priority for returning to school remains a key one for Government.

Susan Acland-Hood: May I add a couple of things?

Q80 **Olivia Blake:** Can I ask a further question? It refers to something you said in response. You mentioned how some children had done better. You mentioned the autism spectrum, but I imagine dyslexia and other learning disabilities would be covered as well. What plans are you putting in place to make sure that lessons are learned about provision, to ensure that the good quality or the improvement seen for those children is protected in any further education they receive?

Andrew McCully: I referred in an earlier answer to the increasing understanding of effective good practice. For instance, the Ofsted assessments of remote provision, which they made on the basis of their monitoring inspections over the autumn period, include lessons and good ideas for provision for children with particular needs, including dyslexia. That is an example. It is not the full answer. We need to continue to develop and learn from that. It is an example of how we continue to improve our understanding of what good looks like in remote provision.

Susan Acland-Hood: I have a few things to add. There are some specific things around the EdTech demonstrators which included some specific expertise on SEND remote education. Oak had some specific SEND provision that was welcomed by quite a few SEND groups, including autism groups, because it allowed people to take content at their own pace and



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review content. This is something that we should be looking at as part of our recovery planning. We are looking at the things we learned from the pandemic that we want to keep and embed in the system.

We are working with schools and others to try to identify, as well as some of the challenges, some of the positive lessons learned that we want to put in place. Local authorities are looking at schools' practice on SEND through the pandemic and what they might want to retain as well. We are running online training for remote education needs in every school, which includes SEND provision-specific elements.

There is one last thing. At the beginning, I was very cautious on promising timing on the SEND Green Paper. Minister Ford has just confirmed in a public stakeholder group that we will be publishing the Green Paper towards the end of June, so I can now be a little bit more specific.

Chair: I feel we should have some sort of celebratory moment. Towards the end of June is the most precise date we've had. We will hold you to that, Ms Acland-Hood. Well done.

Q81 **Olivia Blake:** Thank you. That provides some confidence.

Do you feel that there is anything more, if you had the resources, that could have been done to support disadvantaged children to learn from home? Apologies for the noise, there is a dog on the street that is very loud.

Is there anything more that you can do that isn't IT provision? Other forms of resources are very difficult for disadvantaged pupils, so what more could you have done with more resources for disadvantaged children?

Susan Acland-Hood: These are classic pandemic moments, aren't they? Our talking through dog in the street skills have increased 10,000-fold through the pandemic

One of the things that we learned is that the communication between schools and pupils is incredibly important, and lots of that is not about digital. Lots of schools were thoughtful about phoning, making sure they kept a human connection with people. That is incredibly important. I am not sure that it is a thing about more resources, but it is a thing that we saw and learned. The effort and the thought that schools put in to looking after their children as people and not just seeing them as mini-learners to be fed stuff was really important.

We are starting to see where students use the national tutoring programme that one-to-one intervention can be very powerful. We have some interesting examples. I recently heard a group of children in care talking about their experiences of being in school but in very small groups during the pandemic. They felt that they made extra progress because they were able to have that kind of individual attention. There is something about that that we are trying to draw on as we look at the future response.



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Q82 Olivia Blake: My final question on this segment is about the current provision. To what extent do you feel state schools have provided more online during this recent period of disruption compared with previous ones?

Susan Acland-Hood: They definitely have. We can see that from what schools are telling us, what parents are telling us and what Ofsted is telling us. We have seen schools work hard to learn how to operate in this new world to recognise that this was something that they might need to do to support their children.

We have tried to support them as well as we possibly can through things like the EdTech demonstrator work that helps people learn from one another. We are absolutely confident that there was hugely more provision during this lockdown than during the first as a result of that learning and the clear expectations that were put in place to help people to frame what good looked like.

Q83 Shaun Bailey: I have two points to raise very quickly, slightly separate but connected. Taking a step back to IT provision and the new world we are stepping into, Ms Acland-Hood, what work are you doing to help tackle adult IT illiteracy? There has been a bit of an issue where a lot of adults, particularly in areas of deprivation, do not have the IT literacy that would be needed to support their children. As a result, we have seen things fall through the cracks. Is there a strategy that we can expect from the Department in terms of how we tackle this, because it will be a feature, going forward, of the education landscape to come?

Susan Acland-Hood: Certainly, adult digital skills are something we are really focused on. There is quite a lot of provision out there on basic IT skills. If anybody wants to look at it, you can look at the skills toolkit, and that will give you a set of routes to good-quality skills training. Sorry to be advertorial, but there you go. That will give you a set of information about good-quality training across all sorts of domains, including lots of good-quality foundation IT courses that help people use things.

We are trying, through things like the skills bootcamps that we have set up, to make sure that we have the upper end of the pyramid of IT training to be able to offer people courses that help them retrain in digital skills. They are 16-week courses linked to an interview with an employer.

Q84 Shaun Bailey: I am thinking more in terms of education provision for children. Is there no intervention that can be done through schools on this point? A point that has been raised with my schools during the pandemic is that, because of issues around adult IT literacy, pupils have not been able to take advantage of the programmes that have been rolled out. Is there no intervention that can be done directly through the schools as well?

Susan Acland-Hood: There certainly are interventions that can be done directly with schools. Lots of schools have good-quality family learning programmes in which they involve other local providers. I certainly think there is scope for more of those partnerships between schools, FE providers and others to make that kind of learning available through the school.



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Q85 Shaun Bailey: Hidden harms and hidden vulnerabilities have been touched on throughout the session today. The feedback that we have all probably had from our schools is that the number of children that have come back traumatised as a result of the pandemic, and the changes in behaviour that we have seen, has been quite astounding. I am keen to drill down a bit more.

I know there has been the 2025 target set in terms of mental health provision in schools. Are you confident that you can meet that as a result of the changing landscape that we are seeing? How are you ensuring that schools are able to meet that target? As a result of those hidden vulnerabilities, does it add pressure on that provision? What is the Department trying to do to up the resources for schools?

Susan Acland-Hood: I spoke a little bit earlier about some of the rules we put in place. I will hand over to Mr McCully on this one.

Andrew McCully: You referred to the target for the mental health support teams. That remains crucially important, and the roll-out of that is continuing. We welcome the additional money that the Department of Health and Social Care announced to accelerate the roll-out of that.

The permanent secretary referred to some of the intermediate measures that help with that. I saw the wellbeing for education return provision that we supported local authorities to run. From the responses from local authorities, over 90% of local authorities were able to deliver additional training in schools. That has been a really important part of the immediate response of meeting the sort of needs, Mr Bailey, that you talked about.

Schools are now delivering RSHE with all the support and additional training that has been part of that. Health education is fundamentally at the centre of that provision and points to the new priorities for schools. It is a continuing provision. We have to do more. All of the parts of the infrastructure that I talked about are mechanisms for getting further towards that provision.

Shaun Bailey: I am sure there is more we could delve into, but I will leave it there for now. Thank you.

Q86 Olivia Blake: I want to focus on the catch-up programme. Ms Acland-Hood, what role did you play in shaping the national tutoring programme?

Susan Acland-Hood: I was appointed as acting permanent secretary in September, so I was not here when the initial decisions on the national tutoring programme were made. Mr McCully can speak a little bit about that if you want somebody who was there at the time, although I have read my brief and I can talk about it if you want me to. Since then, I have been trying to make sure that we have good monitoring in place to look at the delivery over the course of this year. I am personally involved in making sure that we are tracking and monitoring how the programme is being delivered.



Q87 Olivia Blake: Mr McCully, how will you measure the value for money of EEF's work?

Andrew McCully: Since we are running a tender for future provision, and the EEF may or may not apply to run that, the importance is being able to look at the targets and the approach of whoever secures that provision in future. It is not a guarantee for the EEF at all. As the permanent secretary said earlier, the decision to extend the grant of the EEF was very much to do with both the expertise that they were already demonstrating in the early pilots for tutoring provision and because of the need for speed to put the provision in place. Value for money and effectiveness are crucial parts of the contract we will be putting in place with the new provider from September.

Q88 Olivia Blake: In that case, how confident are you that whoever the winning bidder is that the trickle-down model will work, and how confident are you that tutors will sign up to that rather than just doing one-to-one tutoring as they may be already?

Andrew McCully: The experience so far of tutors signing up and the number of schools signing up is very encouraging, certainly against the expectations and trajectories that we set. This has real potential to be an important and lasting part of the educational landscape. Therefore, sharing the experiences and the messages of success of the early stages will be an important part of continuing to grow the workforce capacity to do this.

It is a big task, and a key part of our looking at the development of the programme is to make sure that we have the workforce capacity behind it. It will mean increasing activities to bring in, for instance, teaching assistants to improve their capacity and their skills to deliver, and bring in teachers who have left the profession, to the extent to which they may want to return to teaching in different ways. A number of routes are being followed and could be followed earlier. I agree that workforce expectations for a full infrastructure of tutoring are a key challenge in scaling this up.

Q89 Olivia Blake: How will you get assurance as a winning bidder that, perhaps subcontracted, tuition providers will be paying adequate wages, and not too much or too little?

Andrew McCully: That will be a key part of the due diligence that we will expect and that currently happens under the provision. It will be a key part of the due diligence we would expect for all tuition partners who are within the framework arrangements for the new provider.

Q90 Olivia Blake: I am trying to understand how it will work in practice. When will children be receiving the extra tuition? What part of the day? How confident are you, based on that, that the most disadvantaged children will be able to access it?

Andrew McCully: Our key principle is that it is organised and managed by the schools. When schools secure tuition provision, it is the schools that are in control, in a sense, because they are bringing in the tuition, and they



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are making sure that it works for the way they organise provision in and outside school, and for what they know best of their pupils. It is really important that the schools are securing this.

Q91 **Olivia Blake:** Will you be conducting any evaluation of it?

Andrew McCully: Absolutely. Of course. We are learning all the time from the early period of the NTP. Evaluation will be a central part of the development of the programme.

Q92 **Olivia Blake:** What would success look like, and how and when will you know that the programme has been working, Ms Acland-Hood?

Susan Acland-Hood: I mentioned earlier the Education Endowment Foundation research on good-quality tutoring intervention. The point about the connection in school is important. They found that the tutoring intentions were particularly successful when they were planned in concert with the school, and could help children make between three and five months of progress. Success would look like reaching large numbers of children who we know could benefit from tutoring and seeing them make significant amounts of additional progress as a result.

Q93 **Olivia Blake:** Mr McCully, what will the offer be to the 600 schools who have applied for an academic mentor but not yet been allocated one?

Andrew McCully: Teach First has done an extraordinary job of recruiting mentors so far. As the NAO Report indicated, there were more requests from schools than they are able to meet. Schools have other routes too, through the national tutoring programme itself and some of the catch-up provision and extra resources they have received. We would like academic mentor numbers to improve, and that will be a key recruitment challenge for the providers that take this forward.

Q94 **Olivia Blake:** Are you confident that the schools that probably need that resource the most will have access to it going forward?

Andrew McCully: It has been an important part of the academic mentor provision that it is directed at those who have greatest areas of disadvantage. That has been a feature of the academic mentor provision. Behind your question is workforce capacity, the ability of Teach First, for instance, to recruit more. They have done a great job so far in terms of the numbers, but that challenge continues.

Q95 **Chair:** I want to come back on the issue of this nationally procured tutoring programme. Mr McCully, do we know where all these tutors will be? The tutoring set-up is quite variable as it stands now. Where are all those people going to come from?

Andrew McCully: Chair, you are absolutely right. This is a developing provision. If you look at the availability of tutors and tutor organisations, it is more richly—

Q96 **Chair:** We agree it is patchy. Where are they going to come from—all the



additional tutors?

Andrew McCully: There is a challenge for the programme and a challenge for individual providers both to secure tutors and to develop the workforce. I gave some examples in my earlier responses of the sorts of backgrounds that we might expect tutors to come from. It is partly about success breeding success as well, in that the importance of this being part of the sector will develop the workforce for the future.

Q97 **Chair:** It is quite an unregulated sector at the moment. Anyone can set themselves up as tutor, can't they? Is that one potential benefit of central procurement, Ms Acland-Hood?

Susan Acland-Hood: There are quite a lot of people wondering why we have gone down the route of setting up this programme rather than just leaving it to schools.

Chair: Exactly.

Susan Acland-Hood: It is important to make this precise point. Both the quality of the market and the patchiness is exactly why we have gone down this route. Remember that we gave £650 million of the first lot of money direct to schools for them to spend on what they want. This is not instead of giving money direct to schools.

It is difficult to get access to good-quality tutoring provision in the places where it is most needed. The benefit of a large national programme that is procuring lots of tutoring support is that it helps create tutoring capacity in places where there might not otherwise be any.

One of the opportunity areas—I think it was Bradford, but I will check and come back to the Committee—that wanted to do tutoring in schools found that there was literally no good-quality tutoring provision available to them. This programme puts in demand, which means that we can grow the amount of good-quality provision available, so that when schools want it, it is there. It also puts it through the gateway the EEF has set up that badges good quality to try to help make sure that what schools are buying—

Q98 **Chair:** Will they have to have teaching qualifications to be a tutor?

Susan Acland-Hood: The EEF assessed every tutor who applied to be part of the programme and looked at the quality of what they could offer, the guarantees. EEF, essentially, set that based on what their evaluation—

Q99 **Chair:** My question is simply this. Do they have to have a qualification as a teacher or teaching assistant?

Susan Acland-Hood: No, they do not. The EEF found that you can get good-quality tutoring if you set the right parameters. The tutoring provider is typically trained—

Q100 **Chair:** You have given a good explanation of the rationale behind why you went centrally. Isn't there a danger that you smother existing small



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tutoring programmes that have been perfectly okay delivering locally in their area and will then potentially be subcontracted by the central body, with money being scraped off the top?

Susan Acland-Hood: Mainly what we are doing is putting a big investment into this, so tutoring providers should be able to access more rather than less. It is open to schools—

Q101 **Chair:** Do they have to do it through EEF, or can they do it directly?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is still open to schools to provide tutoring other than through the national tutoring programme. They have the £650 million that we have put out that is there for the catch-up, as well as their core school budget that is going in every year.

As Mr McCully said, as we look forward, we would like to bring more people within the scope of the NTP. It is not particularly part of the NTP model to be exclusive, but we want there to be a quality bar that means that people who are being accessed through the national tutoring programme can demonstrate that they are of good quality. We hope to bring more people in over time through the new arrangements.

Q102 **Chair:** It seems a bit Big Brother-esque. We have had a lot of centralisation because of the early stages of Covid. This shaping the market is a bit like the social care market. You can set parameters and standards, and if people meet them they can take it, or you can go down the route of one of the many probation reforms where the crumbs fell to some very specialist and very good organisations that then were very unsustainable because they no longer had a direct contract. The danger is that you get a central body scraping away the profit that was there for the smaller, well-honed organisations that might have existed already.

Susan Acland-Hood: The EEF and the consortium are working with largely charitable bodies. They are not there to make a huge profit, and they are not taking a huge cut. They are operating in exactly the kind of quality gateway that you talked about.

Q103 **Chair:** I used the word “profit”. Perhaps that is the wrong word. Even a charity has to make sure that it can fund itself. If it is not getting the money, and a percentage is going to the central provider, there is a risk. We have seen this in other sectors. Geoffrey and I could probably sit down and write a list of all the organisations where this has happened across Whitehall. How will you make sure that, in creating the new market you talked about, which is, effectively, what you are doing, you are not destroying, as far as it was inadequate in many respects, the existing market?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is certainly something that we will look at very carefully as we construct the contractual arrangements for next year. We are interested in making sure that there is good-quality, healthy provision for schools that want it. We want to make that happen. The challenge is that we want to make sure that, as we do it, we can set quality bars, with



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the ability of someone like EEF or whoever wins the contract for the following year to help us set the quality bar and do some of the organising that helps match people to the right places. The alternative is 22,000 schools running their own separate procurement exercises, which is slightly—

Q104 **Chair:** Except that you have local authorities and you have multi-academy chains. There are other structures. There are the regional schools commissioners.

Susan Acland-Hood: If they want to do that, it is absolutely open to them to do it.

Q105 **Chair:** But if they do that, they have to do it out of their share of that £650 million pot. There is a difference. If they want national tutoring, they have to go through the national programme.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, that is true, but that does not kill off other parts of the market. Without that, we do not think we will be able to grow the provision in the way that I have described to make sure—

Q106 **Chair:** Who is the contractor? If I was a head teacher and I went to the national service and bought it from EEF at the moment, or whoever it may be who runs it in the future, and I have a problem with the tutor, what do I do? Report it back to the centre? Who is managing the performance of that tutor in relation to the pupils and their achievements?

Susan Acland-Hood: Schools choose which provider they want to use from the list. They have a choice at the first stage. They have a relationship direct with that tutoring provider and they talk to them in the first instance. Yes, EEF can help them if they then have challenges that have not been met. It is worth saying that the feedback from schools that have taken part in the programme so far is very positive. People are finding the programme to be good. They are saying children make progress. They are recommending it to one another.

Q107 **Chair:** No one doubts that we need catch-up. I probably speak for all the Committee when I say we would like to see it work. It is a challenge because there is not a well-established market. You are starting from scratch. Forgive us if we are a bit world-weary. We are getting weary of Whitehall inventing something new in the hope that it is going to be the great big solution. We will keep a close eye on this, but we will leave it there for now.

I have some quickfire questions for you, Ms Acland-Hood. Will you be conducting a lessons learned review of what has happened over the last year, so that you are prepared for any eventualities in the future and, if so, when?

Susan Acland-Hood: I am keen that we do this in concert with the work that is going on across Government to think about everything that was done, as I said at the beginning. We will look at that as part of the cross-Government—



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Q108 **Chair:** You must have some mini-exercises going on in the different teams in the Department, something that you as a new permanent secretary have come in to ask.

Susan Acland-Hood: We try to learn lessons all the time on everything. We have talked about—

Q109 **Chair:** Is there anything that we can point to, or the National Audit Office can look at, where you can say, “We did this. This didn’t work, so we’re going to do it differently next time, or we can save money by procuring differently”—anything that is an auditable chain of decision and change?

Susan Acland-Hood: There will certainly be some things that we can show. I am keen that we set up a culture in which we are learning all the time constantly, rather than stopping the activity. My other reflection is—

Q110 **Chair:** I am not suggesting for a minute that you stop the activity. I have to be absolutely clear. As a new permanent secretary coming in, it would seem to be a good opportunity as well, now that you have had a few months there. It is coming up to six months roughly, isn’t it?

Susan Acland-Hood: It depends on what you count. I was confirmed in the post in December.

Q111 **Chair:** Six months in the Department. You are not planning a lessons learned review that you can share with people in the Department or elsewhere at departmental level.

Susan Acland-Hood: No, we will certainly do work as a Department, but I want to do it in a way that is well integrated with what is happening across Whitehall.

Q112 **Chair:** I don’t think the two are necessarily mutually exclusive. I slightly worry that the long Government review that we keep being promised could be a very long way off.

Is there anything specific for special educational needs children that will include the health impact of not having been able to physically attend school? There are a lot of physical therapies that will not have happened because children were living in challenging conditions at home without support. Are you working with the Department of Health and Social Care in particular to evaluate that? Is that a nod?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

Q113 **Chair:** When will we see some results? That is a group of young people who could severely fall behind both academically and physically.

Susan Acland-Hood: I do not have a timescale for you on that. I am sorry.

Q114 **Chair:** Perhaps we can write to each other to get that. We have heard quite a lot of evidence on the knotty issue of the pupil premium. More young people will have fallen into the pupil premium, but because of the point at



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which you measure the data, the money does not flow through to schools very quickly. Is that in your mind, and is there any prospect of some support for schools that are seeing a dramatic increase in children who are now much poorer, in order to make sure that they are getting the support they need?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, it is in our mind. We do almost everything for the following year from the October census, so schools are accustomed to having some lag in the funding. It will allow us to give people earlier certainty—the shift to October for the pupil premium—but we are conscious that there will have been people whose circumstances have changed. The ever 6 measure means that a lot of people who sit on the boundary of free school meals sit inside, because if you have ever had free school meals over the past six years you are eligible for the pupil premium. That will help a little bit. We are keeping an eye on that.

The pupil premium funding overall will go up next year by about £2.4 billion. We will continue to make sure we are investing in that and that as far as we possibly can we are supporting schools. We recognise how brilliantly teachers in schools have done over the course of this year and how hard it has been for them, and we want to do everything we can to support them.

Chair: On that point, we would all agree. Our job is to see if you are being efficient and effective, and whether the economies of it work. We will be coming back to you on one of our main topics every year, the financial sustainability of schools. There will be a lot to dig into there. Thank you very much to our three witnesses for their answers, as far as they have gone today.