

Education Committee

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

Wednesday 24 March 2021

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

Questions 1405 - 1432

Witnesses

[I](#): Ali, Alicia, Bethan, Dmitrijs, Emily and Ladan.

Written evidence from witnesses:



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ali, Alicia, Bethan, Dmitrijs, Emily and Ladan.

Q1405 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone. It is very nice to see you all today. We are doing this via technology. Normally, we would invite you all to the Houses of Parliament to sit with us, but it is great that you are doing this anyway.

In this session, we are going to try to learn from you about your experiences and other young people's experiences during the lockdown. My name is Robert Halfon. I am Chair of the House of Commons Education Committee. Committees in Parliament are there to monitor the work of the Government. We try to look at everything the Government are doing in education and then offer ideas to make things better. That is why we want to listen and learn from you, so that you can give us ideas that we can then go to the Government with and say, "These are the things that need to be done for our young people in education."

Can we start by having you introduce yourselves and then my colleagues will introduce themselves as well? I am going to call your names and ask you to introduce yourselves and your schools.

Dmitrijs: Good morning. I am Dmitrijs. I am in year 10 at Harrow Way Community School in Hampshire. I am currently studying French, history, photography and triple science at GCSE.

Bethan: Hi. I am Bethan. I am from north-east Hampshire. I am in year 13, so in my last year of college, at The Sixth Form College Farnborough. I study German, medieval history and politics.

Chair: Wow. I did politics and history when I was doing A-levels.

Alicia: Hi. I am Alicia. I am 18. I am also in year 13. I am at the Anglo European School in Essex. I study global politics, economics, finance and PE.

Chair: You are not far from me because I am the MP for Harlow, not so far away. It is nice to meet you.

Ali: Hi. I am Ali, from *[Inaudible.]* Academy. I am in year 9 and coming up to my choices for GCSE. There are the compulsory subjects, of course, but I also want to choose history, DT and computer science.

Emily: Hello. I am Emily. I am also in year 9 and going to pick my GCSE options very soon. I am hopefully going for music and possibly sociology and history.

Ladan: Hi. I am Ladan. I am in year 11 and I am currently studying sociology, French and geography as an option.

Chair: Great. It is very nice to meet you. My colleagues will introduce themselves. I told you I was Chair of the Committee and MP for Harlow,



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which Alicia knows well, which is great. David Simmonds, could you introduce yourself?

David Simmonds: I am David Simmonds, the Member of Parliament for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner, which is in outer London. I am also a serving local councillor. I have spent 20 years as the lead member for children's services and education in my local area.

Apsana Begum: Hi, everyone. I am Apsana Begum, the MP for Poplar and Limehouse in east London. I also studied politics for my A-levels, back in the day, and for my degree as well. Before being elected, I used to work for Barnardo's, the children's charity. It is lovely to meet you all. Thank you for coming.

Tom Hunt: I am Tom Hunt, the Member of Parliament for Ipswich in East Anglia. I am newly elected. I did history and politics at university and then Russian history after that. That is my specialism.

Ian Mearns: I am Ian Mearns, the Member of Parliament for Gateshead in the north-east England. It is on the south bank of the River Tyne opposite Newcastle upon Tyne. I have been a Member of Parliament for Gateshead for coming up to 11 years, and I have been a member of this Committee for about that time as well. I left school in 1974—I did not study ancient history but my schooling is ancient history.

Christian Wakeford: Ian's education was ancient history for me as well. I am Christian Wakeford, the MP for Bury South in Greater Manchester in the north-west. I also did politics for my first degree at Lancaster University, although after 11 years I got bored and decided to do a second degree, as one does, in chemistry and astrophysics. I can highly recommend not doing that as a second degree because it is massively intense, but it was certainly an eye-opener.

Fleur Anderson: Hi, everyone. It is great to see you. Thanks so much for coming. I am Fleur Anderson. I am the MP for Putney, which is in south London. I did not do politics for A-level but I did do it for a degree. Then I worked in international development for lots of years before I became an MP. I am looking forward to hearing what you have to say.

Q1406 **Chair:** Thank you. Apsana is going to ask some questions in a minute but do not feel you all have to answer. We want to learn from you. There is no such thing as a wrong answer, because we need you to help us in what we say to the Government.

What have been your experiences in lockdown in terms of education? How did you find it?

Dmitrijs: Online learning, in fact, was such an interesting kind of experience. I believe that whilst it has made me more independent, in that I was able to manage my own learning and create a schedule to carry out my learning, it has been a challenge, obviously. There were digital challenges. Getting the interaction that you would get in a normal classroom was no longer an option for young people. That is one of the things, yes.



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Bethan: I agree with Dmitrijs. Also, one thing about being in college is that each of the different departments you study with have their own very different style of teaching. Some of my classes have had online video lessons since the start of last year's lockdown, and some have been sending worksheets, and only from Christmas onwards did they start to get into proper video calling, which personally I have found the best way of working.

It was not horrible, but I also recognise that I am extremely lucky with my position, because I live in a house and I can be in different rooms from my family and I have technology. I know a lot of people across the country and in my area have had everyone on a call and then have had wi-fi problems. They do not always work the best with online learning, either.

Alicia: I would admit that my lockdown learning experience has been quite different. Because I fall into the category of being a vulnerable child because I am a young carer, I went into school in lockdown. I did not go originally; it was about halfway through lockdown, and I went in after falling quite substantially far behind because my sixth form was not doing online lessons. We were being sent PowerPoint presentations. I was not doing it and was falling behind. When I went back into school and had that structure in the day, it was better for me.

In January, when we went back into lockdown and schools got shut, my sixth form then decided to do online lessons. They finally got it right in the end; it just took a little while. I felt like I got a bit more out of it than I did when we weren't doing online lessons.

Ali: My experience during lockdown was very interesting, because I am a student in year 9, and we were the first generation to study online—it has never happened before. It is interesting to see how we work online and how teachers talk through technology.

Emily: I found education quite hard to take in through online learning. We were taught multiple different subjects and, for me, it was quite hard to take that information in and then bring it into school to continue that process. I had quite a lot of struggles with my electronics and wi-fi. It was quite hard to stay on those calls and then come back to school and completely switch my schedule. Other than that, learning at home made me much more independent than I was because I learned to do things myself and build my way up to where I am now.

Ladan: For me, home school was not as challenging as I thought it would be. I was able to adapt to the schedule I made and I was able to follow it each day. But I would not say the same thing for everyone else in my year group. I know some people were procrastinating and finding it challenging to do work on time and send off the work. They had difficulties with the internet and the work.

Q1407 **Apsana Begum:** My first question follows on from what the Chair said.



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Did online learning and doing your schoolwork online affect your progress?

Alicia: I have had exams this week and then I also had them in September when we first came back. I look back and think that if I had been in school the whole time and schools had not been shut, those exams probably would have gone a lot better and my predicted grades that went off to universities would probably be substantially higher.

It comes back down to the way schools have done it and how schools have dealt with it. For schools that did online learning well in the first lockdown and in the second one, their students will not have as much of a difference in progress. For my sixth form, we did not do online lessons until January and there is quite a big gap between those who have done well and those who have not.

Dmitrijs: Personally, for me, it has not impacted my learning in a negative way. I have managed to maintain the progress that I was achieving face to face.

Reiterating what Ladan just said, not all of my peers have been able to do the same. Lockdown has had such a big impact on everyone, but in so many different ways from what people can imagine. Some people had different problems with their internet. Some people just did not get the work because—something I mentioned earlier—that connection the teacher and the pupil would have in a typical classroom would not be the same.

Personally, I have been absolutely fine, but the physical lessons that do need that in-person contact, like PE and DT, have been missing out. Lockdown has impacted progress overall for the majority.

Ali: It has affected me negatively because, although we have been doing the work online, I feel like I do not have the full information that I need. There are certain subjects, like art and DT, that I cannot do because it is practical work. It is a struggle for me.

Q1408 **Apsana Begum:** Thanks for that. My next question is about any particular subjects that were harder to do online as well. Maybe, Bethan, you can elaborate on that a little bit.

Bethan: Yes, definitely progress was stifled. Also, if you were making progress, it was harder to see it because potentially, if you were writing an exam online, you could google the exam and probably find some model answers online. I know people whose grades have gone up but that is because everyone had access to the internet, revision cards online, and so on.

Also, a lot of my subjects, like politics and foreign languages, are very talking-based. The reason I love German and politics so much is the ability to talk and to get into debate. For me, that is one of the key ways that I learn the syllabus and I learn how to do it. I definitely struggled



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with not having that. We had online conversation sessions in German every week, which are now online and have been since the start of lockdown last year. At the start of lockdown, it was difficult because nobody wanted to talk in German around every other member of their household. Half of the time it was in my lunchbreak, so there would be people cooking pasta in the background while I was supposed to be talking German.

It has definitely been difficult because, as I said earlier, the standards and the different types of online learning we have done have changed so much. Progress has changed from some subjects to others.

Emily: A lot of the subjects were hard to do at home, including music and even things like English and maths. Music is a subject that you need to do physically when learning instruments like the keyboard or guitar. Being at home, we had to use quite a lot of websites, including an app called BandLab. It was much more different than what we would normally do in school. Because I am going to do my GCSE options soon, I have found it quite hard to think that maybe this is what I want to do because, being at home, I did not have all the equipment I needed to set my mind to it.

Of course, in maths, we learn things that we cannot learn straight away. You need that support by your side. If you need help, your teacher tends to be there in person, whereas online it is not as easy to get that help. Even if it is a very practical subject, you need that support and, online, you do not receive as much support as you normally do in person.

Q1409 **Apsana Begum:** Emily, was it also difficult with some subjects, where you might have a lot more group work and teamwork tasks and not be able to do them as well online?

Emily: Yes, we did a lot of our work on Microsoft Teams when we had lessons. We had little group calls that we could go on and we would get separated, but of course it was not the same as being there in person, when we had everyone surrounding us and we had that support from our friends and our teachers. Online, we have those groups and half the time we do not contact our friends because we want to make sure we get that information straightaway. That was mainly how it was for me. Overall, it was quite hard for me.

Q1410 **Apsana Begum:** Thanks so much, Emily. That was helpful. What could your school or the Government do to help you and your classmates catch up on learning? Would tutoring or staying after school to do extra lessons help? What do you think the Government could do or your school could do to help you catch up?

Alicia: Because I am in year 13, some of it in terms of catch-up is not useful in a sense. In my sixth form, we have been doing after-school lessons. They are optional but are to help us with the exams we are sitting this week and after Easter. We have been putting in extra lessons



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when we can to ensure we have covered as much content as possible and to be prepared for the mini exams.

Being a young carer in secondary school, I was not able to stay after school a lot of the time. I know a lot of other young people for other sorts of reasons cannot stay after school. Sometimes, yes, it would help ensure there is not so much of a gap, but having those after-school lessons can make that gap bigger for those who cannot attend for different reasons.

Apsana Begum: That is an interesting perspective, especially what you said as a young carer about hours and time. Thank you, Alicia.

Dmitrijs: I could not stress it enough. Making young people, if you will, do these after-school sessions or do these catch-ups will further take up more time than they already have with a six-hour school day, sometimes even more. That would be more detrimental to young people's mental health than it will be to young people's learning.

Schools and the Government need to understand that young people's mental health should come before the school learning. It is important that we do understand all of our learning and that the curriculum is still taught, but it is much more important that young people have good wellbeing and are still mentally and physically healthy before that kind of conversation begins. Young people's mental health during lockdown has worsened. I am sure there will be studies to prove that for young people.

It would be much more beneficial to look at how young people's mental health can be further improved rather than mainly focusing on catching up immediately.

Apsana Begum: The feeling is quite different in terms of having, say, an extracurricular lesson to learn an instrument to engage you differently or a catch-up lesson for another two hours after school, which is a long day in itself already.

Q1411 **Chair:** What about if those extra hours were predominantly sports activities and wellbeing activities, not necessarily academic learning in a classroom? Would that work?

Dmitrijs: That depends on the young person. I have mentioned that it is all case by case. It is all individual preferences and whatnot. Some people may love that time and may benefit from it. Others may feel that it is quite a burden on their time and they could be doing something more productive with it. Again, it should be optional so that young people are able to pick and choose. Then it would be the teachers' responsibility to ensure that progress is still being maintained in that way.

Bethan: I do not see why you cannot have both, to be fair. We had societies in college, which have now had to be moved completely online because of the pandemic. That is lovely but then also we have the issue that my college policy is currently that if you do not have a lesson or a reason to stay in college, like transport reasons or otherwise, you have to



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go home. A lot of us miss out on the revision classes that are being held because most teachers hold them at lunchtime so they do not have to do them late in the evening. If I am travelling, I often have to miss them or sit on a bus with my headphones on to listen in, which ultimately is detrimental to the quality of learning I get from it.

I also would welcome some sporting or mental health-based activities that are regularly run alongside extracurricular in terms of revision. Education is important but if we can find a way to mix our education with a lot more teamwork learning into that, maybe not just having mental health but also making sure that the work we now study can be done easily within teams. That brings back both the element of group learning that we have not had so much during lockdown and also the element of being with our friends.

Ultimately, when I was put in breakout rooms with my class and small groups with my class last year for the first time, I properly started to learn what I had been missing because I had my friends there and we could talk it through. I am more likely to ask for help if I do not understand something when they are there.

Alicia: I would fully support the whole idea of the extra help being on the sports side of it. I am a PE student. Although A-level PE is pretty much all theory, I have found sports to be very helpful for my wellbeing. There are so many other young people, despite those who are not sporty, who find that sport does help their wellbeing. I would welcome the idea that there is more sport in the curriculum to help those catch-ups. Yes, it is not the most educational way but, in terms of emotional and social wellbeing, it is absolutely up there in the priorities.

Ali: Extra education and extra learning is very useful and important because people can take more information from it. There are certain topics that you can only study at A-level and you need information. For example, quantum physics you would not study in year 9; you would only study that at A-level. There are so many things to study about that. It is good to have that extra information to prepare yourself for your future career at university.

Q1412 **Apsana Begum:** Thanks so much, Ali. I have two last questions. You might not all want to answer them so give me a wave if you want to come in.

The next question is about how you have found online learning itself. Did you have delays to get started up online? Did you get equipment? Did you find it difficult to get set up? Were there lots of things you had to wait for?

Secondly, how did you find coming back to learning in your schools and your colleges two weeks ago? Were you excited? Was there anything you were nervous or worried about? How did it work out for you?



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Dmitrijs: On your last question about coming back to school, mainly I was very excited. It was the excitement of getting back to normality and having that sense of normality again, being in a classroom and seeing friends in person rather than in a group chat or on a video call. That was beneficial because, again, it is that sense of belonging and that sense of normality. That is what has been missing during the pandemic. It is not as easy to meet up with multiple friends, of course, because now for recreational purposes you are allowed to meet one other person, but that has been missing and school does allow that to happen.

Although I was excited, I was quite nervous. We as secondary school pupils came back needing to wear masks inside. Thankfully, I do not need to because I am in an office in a confined space all by myself. I do find that we are wearing masks every single time unless we are outside, but nothing more has changed since we came back from the last lockdown. We are still hand sanitising. We are still ensuring we are keeping our distance, but the school has been absolutely the same.

The school has ensured that pupils are feeling okay. For example, on the first day back, we wrote a letter to our tutor just to say, "This is how my lockdown went." They went through and spoke to every single tutor to catch them up and see how we were doing. It is important that schools need to be prioritising that to make sure young people are feeling well and are looking forward to coming back to school.

Alicia: I want to pick up on a point that Dmitrijs said about wearing masks in lessons. I have an auditory processing disorder, so I find that lip reading is quicker to understand than hearing. In my lessons, to start with, all my teachers were having to wear masks. That was the rule. I very much struggled with my learning and was not getting anything from being in the classroom because I could not understand what was going on. It was taking way too long for me to process what the teacher was saying. My schoolteachers had to wear clear masks. That is quite helpful because it means I can lip read quicker and I can try to process while the lesson is happening, but they fog up very quickly and they are not the most practical things in the world.

I have other friends who are hard of hearing and deaf and they struggle so much in lessons where the teachers have to wear masks or they wear clear ones and they fog up. The quality of learning is not as good as it should be because we are so far behind. There is going to be such a gap between those who have auditory issues and those who do not.

Q1413 **Apsana Begum:** Alicia, that was interesting what you said there about how the needs of you and your peers might not have been met in those initial stages because the mask wearing. Are there any laptops or any digital equipment that might help you? Did you find that was forthcoming and available? Did you have delays in accessing any equipment you might need?



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Alicia: I am allowed to have my laptop in my lessons but the auto-diction on that laptop, in terms of the words and stuff like that, is not good. I would not recommend trying to use it because it does not give you any sort of content that is actually being said. I have a laptop and it does what it does sometimes but, in terms of the diction quality, it is not good.

Emily: On your last question, I feel like having to switch to online learning and then come back to school was quite hard. The last time I was in school for a large period of time was in year 8, so it has been a whole year. We had more freedom in year 8, but I was involved in quite a lot of arguments. School was not the best for me, especially for my mental health, and I know a lot of my friends also struggled with coping with a lot of what they were going through both mentally and physically.

When we started having to do work online, at first a lot of us were happy we had freedom and could stay at home in our safe places, but as time went by it took a toll on all of us. My mental health suffered. I know a lot of my friends started having all these times when they needed each other. We did need that support. When we found out school was reopening and we were allowed to come back, we had a feeling of relief—I know I did—because we knew that we would be able to see everyone again and that support would be back.

Of course, you mentioned masks. For me, it is a bit hard again because I agree that I take in more information from reading people's lips than from actually hearing.

In general, taking that step and coming from online learning back to school was hard, and it still is right now. Of course, we have been back for two or three weeks now, I believe, but I am still getting used to that weird feeling that we are here again. Other than that, I feel that as time goes by everything will go back to how it was.

Apsana Begum: Thanks so much, Emily. Picking up there what you said, it is one thing to want support from somebody else or a teacher, but it needs to be understood that you just want each other as well, your peers, your friends, people you have relationships with who you could not see and have the same connections with during this period.

Q1414 **Christian Wakeford:** Like all of you, I am exhausted and fatigued with Zoom, Teams, Webex and goodness knows which other programmes are out there. You certainly have my sympathies. I have also had the delight of trying to do work at home in the first lockdown with a two-year-old trying to climb on to my laptop, although in his defence the Prime Minister did wave back.

A lot of schools near me were yo-yoing in and out of lockdown and isolation. What was that yo-yo effect on any of you? Did it stall your studies? Has that impact taken you away from your friends? You very poignantly talked about being able to see friends again and that relief. What impact did yo-yoing in and out of isolation have on everyone?



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Alicia: I feel like I am talking too much. My sixth form year had an outbreak two weeks before Christmas and only a few weeks after the October half term. We came back after the October half term and then that first week we had two people test positive. Half the year group was sent home because of contact tracing. It kept getting worse and worse, so we were shut before Christmas.

There was a yo-yo effect. You did not know whether you were going to be sent home because of contact tracing. You were stressing in your lessons every time that member of staff walked past or came to that door. It was like, "Are you the next one to be sent home?"

Then there was a hybrid teaching situation where half the class was in the lesson and then half the class was at home. A lot of students struggled with that because it was not the same experience. Teachers were getting sent home because they were contact tracing. It was a bit of a nightmare in itself and quite stressful.

Bethan: I completely agree with what Alicia said. It felt like every time we got back to a sense of normality, it was taken away again. As soon as we got used to having to socially distance from all of our friends and wear masks everywhere and slowly got used to one system, we were moved back online or moved in person.

My college is lucky that we have a huge cohort—there are over 3,000 people at my college—so we have never been in a situation when we have fully closed the college down because we have done contact tracing. If you have sat near a person who has tested positive, you are sent home.

Weirdly, it seems like the people who have struggled with online learning the most are the ones who get sent home because they have been in contact with people. People have had to go home because they have tested positive or have been near someone who has tested positive. They have then come back for two weeks and, just as they are getting back into being in school, have had to go through it again because they have been contacted to say they might have sat near someone who has tested positive.

It has been weird, especially for our year group. We have had only two years at college, which is really a year and a half when you take away the extra time we will get off after exams and so on. Maybe we have spent six months at college. With my friends, I feel like I have missed out. It does not feel like I am reaching the end. We have never been able to see the universities we are applying to, so we are applying to universities that might be nice but we have no clue if they actually are because we have never been able to see them in person. There has been a weird sense of having to regain control every time and having to be adaptable in the way we do things.

Christian Wakeford: Wearing a face mask is not the most comfortable



thing. I usually have a beard and glasses, so it is not always fun.

Ladan: After coming back from isolation, we have started to take Covid tests twice a week. In a way, that is disturbing our learning. Missing out on that minute of learning can have a huge impact on someone. Because of that, we are missing more learning, which has more effect on our exams, especially for year 11.

Q1415 **David Simmonds:** Thanks very much to all the panellists for your helpful answers to the earlier questions. The section I am going to take us through is focused on extracurricular activities and also wellbeing, which a few people have mentioned.

How have you been able to take part in activities such as sports or drama in the last year? Are there activities you particularly feel you would like to have done but you have missed out on because of the effect of the pandemic on your schools?

Dmitrijs: I am quite an academic student. I study history. I study French. I study everything else. My only practical or creative subject is photography, which has been an interesting subject to take part in. Because of lockdown, of course, our school has a lot of equipment that we use when we are engaging in practical learning in the classroom, like good-quality cameras or the props and lighting that we may have to use for the photos, which was no longer an option for us to use. We have been able to adapt by recapping existing skills we already have and using our mobile phones.

A lot of young people do not have the ability to use a decent—whatever that may mean—mobile phone to take a photo, upload it somewhere, edit it and send it off. It does make it difficult for a lot of young people. Photography is not such a huge subject as English or maths, but it does impact those students who have chosen it as an option.

Bethan: I agree with Dmitrijs. I like to consider myself an academic person—I would go so far as to say I am a bit of a nerd. I do loads of academic extracurriculars. If there is a society about my subject, you will see me there. There were no societies in the first pandemic because we did not know if we were able to facilitate our own meetings. The college had a lot of priorities other than setting them up. Of course, I appreciate that, but that did make it difficult. Some students said earlier about how we could learn extra into our subjects. College societies for me were a great way of doing that. We lost that throughout lockdown.

I also do quite a lot of other extracurriculars. I do a drama class on a Monday night, which has not been that bad during lockdown, but when we came out of lockdown, we were allowed to meet as a drama class once. I think we had two or three weeks of that and then we had to go back online. We are currently trying to figure out how to do a show this year, which might have to be half online because by the time we get back we will get two sessions if we are going to record it properly.



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Also, this year Dmitrijs and I have both been members of the Youth Parliament. A lot of our job as members of the Youth Parliament is about going out and speaking to other young people. We have missed that. It has also been a lot harder to connect with our friends and the young people we serve.

Travelling for me through this campaign was something I loved. I loved travelling to London for meetings. I loved going to different schools and speaking to them. But I definitely feel like it has been difficult and everyone has had to adapt. We have missed a lot of wellbeing aspects and also the extracurricular knowledge.

Alicia: I am completely different from Dmitrijs and Bethan. I am not an academic; I am a practical person. PE has been my love for the past five years. I have absolutely fallen in love with the subject, despite the fact that I am not going to carry it on any further after this year.

The big thing for me that I have missed out on was my last sports day. That sounds cringy and sad but, for me, sport has been such a lifeline and it has done so much for me. I did not get that in my final year. I also compete for my school in cross country and athletics. Not getting my final senior season, as they would call it, and not getting that last race did get me quite upset. I will never get that back. Once I leave sixth form, that is it. I do not get another year to try to make the county team.

I know I am not alone. There are so many kids up and down the country who are missing out on the chance to try to get that county team or even make a squad that they would never have made were it not for their school. Sport is something that so many rely on. Because of Covid restrictions and stuff like that, so many schools have struggled to run the extra clubs and get the numbers up. To run the clubs, you need the numbers and some have struggled.

In my sixth form we were meant to do an after-school sixth form club for sport because we cannot do it in the timetable because it does not work. Because of Covid, we were unable to even get it started because it just was not going to be feasible or possible. If we had got that after-school club going, wellbeing within our sixth form would have been so much better.

Emily: We had the opportunity of doing a lot of enrichment online. We had virtual tours around museums and a lot of things along those lines.

I have been part of a choir since I was little. Since I was in primary school, I have always done things to do with music and so on. Of course, we have our own school choir. In our Ark community of schools, we tend to go to all of these events together and we perform together. When Covid hit, we could not do that anymore. We could not meet up anymore. We could not sing together or make music together.



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We found a way. We started singing on calls and, to be honest, it was not the best. We had to unmute at times and you could hear the static. It was quite bad. It is quite hard for me to have to forgo something that I want to take part in in the future in terms of a career online when the quality is not the best and we cannot do it in the way we normally do. In a choir, you are meant to be with people and online it just does not work.

I know people who have podcasts and they do a lot of sport like yoga, but it has all been the same for us. It is quite hard. Some people have found it easy, which is good, but a lot of us have found it hard because of electronics and also because we cannot be in groups.

Q1416 David Simmonds: We got very clear messages there. Thank you very much indeed for that.

The Government have proposed having summer schools as a way of helping people catch up with schoolwork and also sports and extracurricular activity. What do you think about that idea? Would you want to go to one if it was available in the school holidays? How would your friends and your peers feel about it?

Dmitrijs: It would be a great option for a lot of young people. It would allow young people to do it, but only if they want to. For the young people who have powered on with their schoolwork, like me, if we were made to go to a maths lesson in the middle of August, it would make it that little bit harder. It would almost look like a burden.

Young people deserve their school holidays because they have worked so hard throughout lockdowns and throughout online learning. They have caught up with everything. They should not need to have those struggles and those burdens and the anxiety of still needing to go to school.

But if they want to and if the teachers do believe that actually it would be beneficial for them to do so, of course, suggest it to the young person and talk to the young person and do it. It has to remain optional. It would be more detrimental than not for young people to attend these schoolwork catch-up sessions in the summer holidays.

However, maybe for sports and wider activities, because of that physical element, young people have missed out. If lockdown restrictions and Government guidance continue to ease with the road map announced by the Prime Minister and if we are allowed to lift all social contact limitations, it would be great. Young people would be able to hug again. Young people would be able to do these activities that involve contact, like rugby. That would be allowed, they would be much more able, and it would be more enjoyable for those young people to spend the summer like that.

Emily: I feel it should be completely optional for the students. For the people I have known, a lot of their mental health has worsened over the period of lockdown and quarantine. I know that a lot of people have been trying their best and have been doing quite a lot of hard work. I feel that



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if we had online lessons or lessons in general in the summer holidays where we could be catching up, it could be quite upsetting to a lot of people.

Mental health is not just physical or mental, of course; it is both in one. It is about being able to keep a positive state of mind and focus on your work just as much as you focus on yourself. I know a lot of people struggle to balance both things equally.

If it were not an option and students did have to go without wanting to, it could be quite harmful for their mental health. I know that if people tried to do their best and do not get the credit for it, it would hurt quite a lot.

Alicia: My message is quite similar to the others. It should definitely be optional. I have been working part-time since I was 16. For me, the summer holidays is that time when I can work seven days a week and get as many hours in to try to help my mum financially. I have always done that as a carer, to be a financial help and aid to my mum. If it were an option, I would definitely not go because I would rather help financially within the family than do my education, because I have always prioritised my mum and my caring responsibilities over my education.

Q1417 **David Simmonds:** Thank you. I have not seen any more hands go up so we will move on to the next question. This is about what you found was most difficult about the lockdown and also anything that was positive. A few people have mentioned that there were opportunities that arose out of it. I am interested in the highs and the lows from your perspective.

Dmitrijs: A good thing about lockdown was that sense of being able to become much more independent in managing my own learning. The first lockdown was very different from the third lockdown. In the first lockdown, schools sent lots of worksheets, documents and whatnot to look over. It was not, "You have to do this". It was, "Do it or not". But I did do it and what could have been a six-hour day turned into a two-hour day with all of the worksheets I was presented with. Then I had the rest of the day to do whatever.

As Bethan mentioned, I am a serving MYP. That presented me with so many different opportunities to do more meetings and to talk to audiences like you. It gave me lots of different opportunities to work on different projects and whatnot. Yes, that was a good thing about lockdown.

The bad thing about lockdown—and a lot of people would agree with me—was missing that human contact. It was all about the interaction that a lot of people do crave, which we took for granted before the coronavirus was even a thing. You would be able to turn around to your partner to talk to them, "I do not get this whatsoever," or vice versa. That was no longer as easy as it would be in a normal classroom.



Bethan: On the positives, everyone has a bit more time to be involved in extra hobbies. As lockdown progressed, I got better at spending more time researching or doing things that I wanted to do, which I guess was a negative during the first lockdown, in that I had a real tendency to overwork.

At the same time, I think for everybody, home also became a place of study, a place of work and a place of worship. It was hard for me to change what I was doing. I would do a six-hour day online and then I would revise and then I would have dinner. It would still feel like I was in college because I was still at home in the same place. I would be working until 10 pm or 11 pm at night because I felt like nothing I was doing was sinking in. To some extent, it did not sink in properly, partly due to the overwork and partly because I struggled with online learning quite a lot.

On the positives, everyone has learned to use Zoom during this lockdown. If they did not know how to use Zoom last year, everyone does now. Also, I had opportunities from it that I would not have had before. For example, I met Jacob Rees-Mogg online on my birthday last year, which I never thought would happen. I spent my birthday talking to Jacob Rees-Mogg.

I feel that there are definitely positives out there, but the sense of uncertainty still remains. Now I guess we have something to look forward to with the road map. Especially for Alicia and me, who are going to university potentially in September, the feeling still remains. Young people lost their prom in year 11 and we have no idea whether we are going to celebrate or be able to do anything when we leave college. For people who have spent so little time in college, it feels like we are being pushed out into the big scary world. I do not know whether I am properly ready or properly adjusted back to what I am doing.

Q1418 **David Simmonds:** Thanks. That is helpful. It sounds like quite a lot of the rites of passage we would expect—like my son left nursery to go to school for the first time and there is usually a big graduation ceremony and all the mums and dads come to say goodbye—were all cancelled and did not happen at all.

Alicia: I want to start with the negatives. As I have mentioned multiple times, I am a carer. I was not “locked in” because those are not the right words, but it felt like it in the first lockdown. I called it being locked in the four walls of my house. Normally, school is my respite and I go to my young carers project to get respite away from home. That being taken away from me was quite harmful because it meant I was not getting that break away. I was very much in my caring role 24/7 and did not get “me time.” My “me time” was my one piece of exercise a day, which, in all honesty, was not the most helpful in terms of getting out. That did not do a lot for me. Socialising and human interaction is such a way for me to help feel my age. When that was taken away and I was having to do it via a screen and stuff like that, it did not feel the same and I felt I was missing out on part of my childhood.



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The positives have been some of the opportunities that have come out of lockdown. I have done so much campaign work in terms of helping young people and young carers and all sorts of crazy things. One of the highlights for me was getting to help write the young carers guidance—something that I will probably keep on a little mantelpiece somewhere. I helped ensure that young carers were thought about in the global pandemic.

There is so much I could talk about in terms of education and what has happened. The fact that I am still in sixth form is such a big thing because of the amount of times in the past year I have thought that I should drop out and go to a college and do a part-time course because I will be able to cope better. The fact that I have stayed in sixth form and kept going no matter how hard it has been, for me, is a big positive.

Q1419 David Simmonds: They are brilliant CV things. Given that we are a cross-party Committee not everyone will agree, but talking to Jacob Rees-Mogg on your birthday sounds like a brilliant memory to have.

We seem to have lost Ali, Emily and Ladan on the video link. If you are there, do please raise your hand or come back in.

The Committee has been looking at the impact of social media, both positive and negative, on young people's mental health and their lives generally. Tell us a little bit about how the amount of time you have spent on social media has changed during the lockdown period and, if so, how it has changed. Did you find yourself using new things and engaging in different ways and doing things you may not have been able to do before?

Chair: David, could I just add to that, if that is okay? Some of you have talked about mental health. Whenever I go to a school, which in normal times is usually every week, the pupils always talk about mental health and wellbeing. When I ask them what has an impact on their wellbeing and mental health in general, they say that it is social media. I would be very interested to know your views on that and if you agree with that. What should we be doing to help children with mental health and wellbeing?

Alicia: I will answer David's question first. To say the least, screen time has gone up way too much. Since going back two weeks ago, it has definitely gone down, which is a good thing. With the rise of TikTok and things like that, I have spent hours on my phone because I have nothing else better to do, scrolling and doing whatnot.

There have been positives on social media, though, for me as an ex-MYP and for Bethan and Dmitrijs as MYPs. We have been able to achieve so much with campaigns that have taken off because of social media. There have been some positives.

But there have been a lot of negatives for those who have had issues with bullying in schools and stuff like that. Instead of dealing with it in



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person, it has gone to social media and it has been quite targeted. There has been a big issue around that. Also, with the TikTok algorithm, there has been some harmful content on children and young people's phones. Some of that has been quite harmful, which is not the right thing that should be done. Going back to Rob's question about how mental wellbeing has been affected by social media, with TikTok's algorithms there are some things that young people should not be seeing that can affect them long term.

If you are going to spend all day on your phone, it is going to have such an effect because of the lights, and you are going to become screen-obsessed and it will lead to insomnia. So many young people struggled with sleep over the lockdown. Social media has played a part in people's sleep patterns. After being on Zoom all day, people will spend the rest of the night on Zoom rather than getting their "me" time and time away from the screen. That has become quite a big issue.

Bethan: To answer your question first, my screen time has gone up—or maybe it has stayed the same. But when I have been using it it has been worse. One of the problems with online learning is the fact that, because I am at home right now, I have my screen up and I also have my phone next to me, and during classes it is so easy to reach for the phone and start scrolling. I have to make a conscious effort to stop.

I have downloaded apps to my phone to manage my screen time. I have an app that gives me points for the longer I am off my phone and then that generates cheaper theatre tickets and so on. I use that quite a lot because I am a big incentive person; I need to be rewarded for stuff I do. I have found that useful.

Also, I am very grateful for the positives that social media has had over lockdown. We have all been able to take the chance to educate ourselves further on different issues, which I respect. I gave evidence to the Science and Technology Committee a few years ago about social media and screen time. Social media is definitely an issue but unrealistic social media is the issue.

Maybe we have seen that more during lockdown but it has slowly changed. At the start of lockdown, people were posting on social media when they were meeting other people, even when it was against the lockdown rules. That is difficult for most of the UK who are staying at home but are seeing other people break the rules. It feels like a bit of a rub in the face. Even though we know they are risking their health more by doing so, what is the point in obeying the rules?

Also, typically, everyone portrays the good points on social media. I am guilty of that too. Everyone shows the best of it—like my social media is pretty full of nice sunset pictures or different meetings I have been on with cool people—but then it was difficult to see when other people were struggling. We are slowly getting better and being more open, especially as a result of the pandemic, and making sure we are checking up on



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people. Even if they look okay on social media, how are they actually feeling within themselves?

Q1420 Jonathan Gullis: With regard to social media, have incidents of bullying reduced during lockdown? I know it was something of an issue in schools. I was wondering whether that has therefore depleted because you have not been in school at present due to the lockdown. Is it still as prevalent as it once was but, unfortunately, because you are not in school, it is not being dealt with as easily by your heads of year or pastoral teams as it normally would have been?

Dmitrijs: Cyber-bullying has in some cases increased. Some young people did have a lot of spare time and might have been so bored that they resorted to what they thought was actually quite harmless but that was quite harmful to the opposing side. In some cases, it has.

To Mr Simmonds' question, my screen time has been absolutely horrendous. I am scared to open up my screen time app because, as Alicia has said, my TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram usage is out of this world. It has definitely decreased after now going back to school.

But, again, there are positives of social media. Young people have been able to interact with their friends over social media. That has been their lifeline sometimes. To text, "Hey, how are you doing?" could be so meaningful to a young person when they are having a bad day or they are just not feeling it.

To the Chair's question, mental health and social media is always an interesting topic. While social media has its benefits, it always has its negatives as a result of some of the benefits. While screen time has gone up and I might have not gone to bed until 1 am because of it sometimes, actually social media has impacted young people's mental health because of the lack of interaction with their friends in real time and because they have to depend on social media. It might be that as a consequence, unfortunately, mental health has been impacted.

Q1421 Chair: Bethan, the first thing I am going to do when we have finished this session is to look up this app that you have told us about. All MPs should be using this app. What is it called?

Bethan: It is called Hold.

Chair: We are on our phones all the time. We get told off by constituents who see us on the television looking at our phones in Parliament. We need this app very quickly.

I am going to pass over to Tom Hunt, who is going to talk about exams and related subjects. Thanks for waiting, Tom.

Q1422 Tom Hunt: Good morning. I am going to go into some specific questions about assessment. You have all done a very good job of not just thinking about yourselves and your own experiences but advocating for some



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others whom you know may have had different experiences.

Are there any particular individuals, maybe friends, whom you have been worried about with the way they have coped for the last year? In particular, do you have any sense of how any friends who have learning disabilities or special needs have found it?

Dmitrijs: That is an important question. The coronavirus pandemic and the resulting lockdown have impacted young people in so many different ways. I know of people who have struggled and found it difficult to manage online learning. They have found it difficult to maintain existing relationships and friendships because of the situation that young people have been put in—that everyone has been put in, in fact. Some young people unfortunately have suffered badly with mental health. They have started to have issues because of the lack of contact and existing anxiety that has unfortunately worsened over lockdown. Yes, there have been.

Chair: Tom, I notice that Ladan, Emily and Ali are back on camera. I do not know if they want to answer this question.

Tom Hunt: Bethan?

Bethan: I am more than happy to go next, but if one of the people from the school wants to go?

Chair: Ladan, Emily, Ali, do you want to answer that question if you can hear us?

Tom Hunt: Are there any friends you have been particularly concerned about, with how they have found it all in terms of both their mental health and how their learning may have been affected?

Ladan: There was this one friend who said that she found it difficult to stay motivated and do the work. Then I had to make sure that she was awake and in the lessons every single morning. She said that it was very hard to find the motivation during that time. She said she did not know what to do and the only thing she could do was try, but it was very hard for her to keep motivated. I am guessing that is how everyone else has felt during that time.

Tom Hunt: That is great to hear, and that was a great role you played there, supporting your friend.

Alicia: Sorry, Bethan, to get in front of you in the queue. Those students who had pre-existing mental health conditions have struggled. Over the past year, I have had three or four friends who have been sectioned and, unfortunately, because of that, they have not been able to continue with their education. As they have come out of being sectioned and have come back into community mental health teams, they have struggled to pick their education back up.

Another big thing that I have found is that I have had quite a few friends who have lost their parents due to Covid—unfortunately, they have passed away. For them, they have struggled to keep on with their



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learning while they are trying to grieve in a pandemic. There is not a lot of support for grieving young people out there and it is not very adequate, I would say from having a close friend of mine lose his mum. For those who are still trying to continue with a standard level of education and grieve, it has not been good enough.

Tom Hunt: It is a very important point, Alicia.

Bethan: I have a physical disability and my two brothers have special educational needs, autism and so on. That has been a difficult journey for everyone, especially my family. I am very aware that we do not have it as bad as a lot of people do, but that does not negate some of the issues we have had. It has definitely been a struggle to keep motivated.

A few of us have tutors. Even with tutors, you can come out and nothing sinks in because you have been online for six hours. For a lot of my family, when they come off the screen, they go straight back on to the phone. Having to keep motivated when these people even in a classroom environment struggle, and then having the freedom at home where we cannot keep an eye on everything because every one of us is also in education or has a job, has been difficult.

I think that gaps have definitely widened or people have slipped up, and I worry that now there is a bigger divide because the people who have done well out of lockdown have profited against those who have fallen far behind as a result.

Q1423 **Tom Hunt:** Thank you very much. That is very important. It is interesting to know that one of your brothers has autism. I have been very keen to take into account their experiences.

I have some specific questions now about assessment. Were you expecting to have exams this summer? Now we know we are not going to have conventional exams, what are your feelings about the grade awarding process and the assessment process that has been put in place?

Alicia: I can imagine Bethan and I will have a similar situation on this, both being in year 13. We will probably laugh about this or we will start crying about how stressful the past year has been.

After having the past year 13 exams cancelled, we were originally being told we were going to sit exams, "Tough luck. Deal with it. You will be fine." That was great advice from teachers. Top quality. I do IB exams as well, which is an international qualification. I do IB, an A-level and a vocational A-level. The guidance for me was always going to be chaos because it was always going to be different things for different situations.

In January, when schools were shut at the very last minute, I had a vocational exam two weeks later. Not being told what was going on was great fun. I understand that guidance takes time to process and whatnot, but I went ahead and sat my exams despite the fact that schools were closed. I was one of the many vocational students who went ahead and



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took the risk to sit the exam. Luckily enough, it paid off for me because I got quite a nice grade out of it.

The guidance had been very late for exams. It kept chopping and changing and exam boards could not make up their minds. I was originally told that I was going to have two sets of marks and that would be it. For my IB exams, I had one on Monday and I have one tomorrow. The final submission day is in a month's time. That is it. After that, it is done for me.

With the A-levels, it is chopping and changing. Whatever is happening with these mini exams and whatnot, it feels like they are holding us by a thread and we are being dangled up and down. They keep changing their minds about what direction they want to go. We keep being told, "Keep going, keep going," and we are all burnt out. We have had enough. We just want to know whether we are going to sit exams or not sit exams, or whether these mini exams are going to be the way we are going to be graded.

Chair: What you have just said is very powerful—really, really powerful—and we are going to remember that, in particular the way you phrased it as well.

Tom Hunt: Thank you very much for that, Alicia.

Bethan: I completely agree with Alicia. It is one we have to try to laugh about, because otherwise we will end up crying, and that is not something to do at a Committee hearing.

It has definitely been very tough, the fact that no one is very aware of, or has been aware of, how stuff works. We all knew that exams were not going to happen in their conventional format. However, I was only told last week what format my exams would take. As someone who made a conscious effort over the last six months to relearn everything I did during the first lockdown, for example, one of my subjects has cut that entire syllabus or that part of the subject. I guess that is great for people who have not taken the time to relearn that, but it now feels like I have wasted many hours of relearning stuff, which is really difficult. If we were doing conventional exams it would be difficult but at least I would have a date and I would have a time—"This is what is coming up and this is what I have to prepare for." The last few weeks and months have been difficult because I am revising stuff but I am possibly revising stuff that is never going to come up, or the whole syllabus could be cut.

It feels like we are still doing exactly the same thing that we would, but they have added so much uncertainty and played with our education. I know that is not the school's problem or particularly anyone's issue, but it is a really unfortunate way that it has played out. I think it has definitely had a toll on our mental health as well.

Tom Hunt: Thank you for that. I am going to go to Ladan now. Then I am going to ask a final question and then I think Mr Gullis would like to



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make an intervention.

Chair: We are also going to spend five or 10 minutes answering questions from you as well because we have fired loads of questions to you.

Ladan: Year 11s were told that exams were cancelled and that is when people started to stop revising and started enjoying themselves. Then a month later they were told that exams were back on, and now they have to cram everything into a couple of weeks to prepare for the exams that are coming up. That is a lot of pressure on us, especially the fact that we have to at least revise six hours a day to catch up everything and make sure that we are ready for the exams that are coming up in three weeks.

Q1424 **Tom Hunt:** Thank you. That is definitely a common theme from all three of you—the uncertainty, the shifting of the goalposts and the anxiety that has caused.

I have a final quick question on this. I used to quite like exams because I used to do better in exams than my teachers would expect. I would go away, learn things in my own funny way and then I would often surprise people. Are there any of you, and also your peers, who feel like you have missed out and missed an opportunity to show what you can do through the conventional exam?

Bethan: Personally, I would have liked to do exams. There is no way I would have been able to do full content, but I do miss the idea of a deadline. As I said earlier, I would have had something to work towards. In that case I knew what I was doing and I had sat these practice exams a million times and was like, “I’ve got this.”

My other worry is that, at least in my college, the different classes are doing the same exam but at different times. If one of my friends happens to leak what the questions are to another friend, then that has put me at a disadvantage because other people might know the question and thus be able to prepare before I can. I am glad at the way it has turned out, but I definitely do wish that there had been some sort of final exam, as it were.

Emily: I struggled a lot with my mental health and I thought that a lot of the work I did was not good. I thought everything I was doing was not the best it could have been. I was in a really, really bad state for maybe the past year or two. I feel like these exams, now that we have come back, are helping me in a way because I can see that the work I have been doing is good. It shows me that even though I was struggling there is a huge part of it that proves I was doing my best, I was doing something that was good and it went all according to plan. I feel like that goes for a lot of other people too.

Obviously, a lot of us struggled to get our minds to, “Okay, let us do some work.” Now, for me, seeing the exams and seeing the results it is a bit more amazing. I know that it was lockdown and it was really hard for



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us. Our teachers, and ourselves, should know that it was a challenge, it was a really big obstacle that we had to overcome. It was not easy; it really was not. Now I feel like with these results we can take a step further to improve ourselves.

Chair: I am going to bring in Jonathan, because of time.

Q1425 **Jonathan Gullis:** Thank you, Chair. This is a very quick question for those of you in year 13. Are you feeling concerned about the options going forward, whether that be university, due to the fact that lots of students last year are reapplying this year as well or maybe apprenticeship opportunities that will not be as easy to access because of Covid and businesses not having the money they once had?

Alicia: I feel like this is another situation where if I do not laugh, I will cry. I am lucky that the course I am applying to is not the most popular. I have applied to do child and youth studies. I have also done deferral entry because I do not want to go to uni this year; I need a break from education. Yes, I need a break.

I was originally going down the apprenticeship route but I found that for what I wanted to do it was not going to be feasible to enjoy it in the pandemic. I do not want to be working from home. I would much rather be doing something hands on, practical, in person, and I would not be getting that working from home.

I am quite worried about what my future has to hold because forever I am going to be known as part of the generation of Covid. Being students that never properly did the exams, our results will never be seen as the same. I think that is something that will affect us for a very long time.

Bethan: The uncertainty is definitely a huge issue. I am going to university this year, hopefully, if I get the grades. The unis themselves have not been able to support us that much with the process. My uni wants A*, A, A. It only takes, I think, 10% of applicants for the course I got into. It is extremely competitive so that is a lot of stress on whether I will be able to get the final grades and, if I do not, what the leeway is with it. We have not been told if there is any way that we could still get in under a slightly lower grade than was anticipated. It is a bit weird also that they have not changed any of the grade flexibility, in spite of the amount of disruptors the pandemic has caused.

On the topic of apprenticeships, I want to do international relations and German at uni. There are not apprenticeships there so that was not really a proper issue for me. However, my brother is in year 11 and he is applying for apprenticeships. That has been really difficult because interviews have been on a call or have been online, which are not the same as being in person.

I also missed out on opportunities to do work experience and so did not develop my CV that way. I was supposed to be going to Germany to do political work experience last year, which I have also missed out on.



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There is a lot of uncertainty. As Alicia said, I also worry that my grades will never be good enough. They might look nice on paper but will people brush them by because I never properly did it and I might have had the likelihood to cheat?

Chair: Thank you. We are supposed to finish at 11.30 am but can I check if you would like to stay on for a few more minutes?

We have been asking you questions and all of the answers have been pretty remarkable. There are lots of things that we will look at very closely when we see the full transcript. Alicia, when you said about students being on a thread, that was very, very powerful. All of you have been extraordinary.

Before we ask you if you would like to ask us anything, can I check if you are okay to stay on for a few more minutes and if the school is happy as well, Ladan, Emily and Ali?

Dr Caroline Johnson has one quick question and then we will come on to your questions.

Q1426 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I do think your answers have been very interesting today and thank you for your time.

You have talked about the exam uncertainty and the concern about lost learning. One of the suggestions that has been made is that it would be helpful for students to have some sort of assessment to know where they are up to and to quantify that lost learning. How much do you think the idea that you have lost learning and time, but not been able to know by how much, amplifies that loss in your mind and affects your learning, your stress and your mental health? How much benefit do you think you might, or might not, get from assessing exactly how much lost learning there may or may not be in your particular case?

Alicia: I am going to be quite blunt about that. I do not think it is relevant at all. As a year 13 I can see by looking at the content, when looking at a specification, what I know and what I do not know. I am not an exam person; I have quite extreme exam anxiety. Sitting an exam to find out what I do and do not know would be a bit of a waste of time and a waste of resources, in all honesty, for me.

Ali: Lost learning is a big impact on all students because when you get an assessment at the beginning it really tests your knowledge of what you have learnt over lockdown. If you feel like you have not done well it is going to impact you negatively and your mental health. I feel like coronavirus has delayed many of our lives and our careers because it is stopping us and wasting our time from growing through our learning.

Dr Caroline Johnson: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Q1427 **Chair:** Who would like to ask us a question now? Alicia, your hand almost jumped out of its socket. Alicia, you go first.



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Alicia: It is not really an issue that belongs to you guys, because obviously you guys are not the spokespeople. However, I know a big thing for the year 11s and year 13s was that at the beginning of January we were all officially told by Gavin Williamson that exams were cancelled and there were going to be no exams whatsoever. Why is it that now—I know Bethan and myself can relate—we are sitting even more exams than we were originally and those papers have been brought months in advance? I was meant to sit my econ paper in two months' time but I sat it on Monday. Why were we originally told it was cancelled when, in fact, they are not cancelled?

Chair: We have a former teacher on our Committee who occasionally mentions that he is a former teacher—very occasionally. I am going to get him to answer that. Please, Jonathan, could you answer Alicia's question?

Jonathan Gullis: Thank you, Chair. Yes, I only mention it every other Committee meeting so I think I have been quite bashful.

Alicia, to answer your point effectively, the system that then came about was that teachers need to provide more evidence to be able to justify the grade they are giving you. Therefore, what has happened is that it has been agreed that schools can, if they wish to, have you sit papers—past papers or whatever—in order to gather evidence that they can use against your other work throughout the last two years. As you correctly say, that means lots of teachers are maybe planning mock exams or doing course content that covers the whole course that you may not have been able to access and now are suddenly having to do this in a very short window frame.

The date that sticks in my head as when schools have to send all this data analysis off to exam boards for approval is 18 June. Because they have not necessarily had the guidance from exam boards quickly enough—as you rightly pointed out—about which exam papers are and are not acceptable, how assessment can work for each different subject and each different exam board has meant the teachers, fairly, have effectively panicked. They have tried to do as much as they can to build up the evidence base to make sure the grade you were destined to get if you sat the exams is given to you, rather than having to go through some lengthy appeal process. Ultimately, that is what has come about.

That is why I was annoyed that system had been created. I think as a Committee you will find—I am so glad you said you wanted exams—our question to the Minister was whether exams should have gone ahead. He was trying to tell us, "54% said they did not want to do mandatory exam papers." I feel that 54% was not enough to quantify as the overwhelming majority of young people as well as teachers, who were in the majority in favour of you doing exams in order to justify your grade. That is where that system has gone wrong, unfortunately.

Q1428 **Chair:** We have just published a letter on what our thoughts are on the system that has been developed, Alicia and everyone. I think it is going



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to go up on our Committee website in the next few days. As soon as it is published we will send it out to you. Who has another question they would like to ask us?

Bethan: Mine is more of an opinion question because I would be interested, and I am sure the rest would be interested, to hear everyone's thoughts on why you think the gap in learning will even up. I know I can sit here now in year 13 and say that I have lost education. When will we stop giving concessions or when do we think the year groups will get to what they were before Covid? For example, I can speak here now and say I have lost learning. Also, Dmitrijs's year has lost a horrendous amount of learning and is still most likely taking exams next year.

Chair: Fleur, I do not know if you want to answer that one.

Fleur Anderson: Thanks very much. The answer is that we do not know, Bethan. That is a really good question: when on earth will the impact of this stop being felt? I have a son in year 9 as well so I can see that the impact is coming down the years. Everyone has lost learning all the way through the years. Therefore, it will be a very long time and it will have to be something the Government have to look at for a long time. That is part of our role in the Committee, to say, "Do not think this is all done in a year's time."

There is going to be an impact from this and it will be felt in the many, many ways you have talked about in this meeting. It is a disproportionate impact on some more than others, as you have been saying as well. That is something we have to keep looking at. It is a really good question but we do not know the answer--a long time.

Q1429 **Chair:** David, did you want to say something? I saw your hand go up.

David Simmonds: I know Jonathan has a point on this. When we look at the research that has been done about other things that can disrupt young people's lives—for example, children who have been in the care system because things have gone wrong for them—we know in those situations that although there is a lot of disruption around 18 to 21, by the time people are a little bit older, very early 20s, their situation and their outcomes on where they are in life tends to get back in line with where it would have been had they not suffered that disruption.

Therefore, one of the things that they will be looking at is not just what the impact is on those people who are going through the system but also how we have that in mind so we support young people going forward, as they go to university and the impact on them afterwards. We learn from what we already know about things that are going on where we support young people in other ways.

Q1430 **Chair:** Ali?

Ali: This question is not specifically about the link to coronavirus but is more about you guys. What made you want to become an MP and to work with the Government?



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Chair: We all have our own different things but I will tell you a story, Ali, about my own experience.

When I was 10 years-old an MP came to my school. This is, honestly, a true story. He said that the Houses of Parliament had a thousand rooms. I did not believe it. I could not understand that anywhere could have a thousand rooms, apart from Buckingham Palace, so I demanded to go to see Parliament every day. Eventually I got taken, still at 10 years-old, to Parliament. I went inside the building—I was very strange at 10 years-old—and I thought it was the most incredible place. I decided I would be an MP on that day.

I also wanted to be an MP separately because I was born with a significant disability, and I thought it would be one way to give public service because you have to give something back. I was looked after by Great Ormond Street Hospital, and were it not for them I would not be able to walk.

It is an incredible thing because you serve your community, your local area—I live in my area of Harlow, which I am really pleased Alicia knows. I love my area. You also have to represent your constituency in Parliament. I am passionate about education and apprenticeships. The first ever speech I made was about apprenticeships, so I wish good luck to your brother who is doing it, Bethan.

There are a lot of reasons why people become MPs. Everyone will have their own different experience. I decided literally at 10 years old and then it took me about 30 years to make it happen. None of my family are in politics, so it is a unique experience and I am very lucky to be doing it.

Ali: Thank you.

Q1431 **Chair:** It is a pleasure. Who else would like to ask a question?

Dmitrijs: Thank you. This is with my youth activist hat on. This opportunity has been absolutely amazing for me, to be able to voice young people's opinions, voices and whatnot. What will you as a Committee do from this to ensure young people's voices are heard and are reflected within Government and in all of the policies and guidance that they do create? That is my main question.

Chair: I am going to give this to Caroline or Christian. Caroline, do you want to answer that question?

Dr Caroline Johnson: That is a very important question, how to ensure voices of children are heard because, of course, young people do not vote until they are 18.

Be assured that we do have ways of making sure voices are heard. Bethan said earlier she had given evidence in the past to the Science and Technology Committee, and you are giving evidence to this Committee today. We do have a Youth Parliament. Many MPs, as Robert has said, visit schools and listen to their constituents on a regular basis, as I did before the pandemic.



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We also have a Minister for Children, currently Vicky Ford. Vicky's job, her brief, is essentially to look at the voices of children and see children are well represented and well looked after, despite not having a vote. Of course, as we look at every policy we try to make sure that children are well thought of and everything is carefully thought through.

My background is as a children's doctor so I look at things through that prism. Jonathan has mentioned today, possibly, that he was a teacher in the past. He has mentioned that occasionally and other Committee members will mention their past jobs. My background is a children's doctor, as a consultant in a hospital. There is a breadth of people throughout Parliament who have different experiences of working with children, either now or in the past, who also bring that benefit.

I will say to children, "Write to your MP." I get many letters a year from children who live in my constituency, even children from primary school. It is always interesting to hear what children and young people think about the various issues of the day because they are our future and it is important that we get young people, and particularly girls, engaged in politics as soon as possible.

Q1432 Chair: Thank you. Are there any final questions, maybe from Ladan or Emily? No. Anyone who would like to ask another one who has not asked one? Bethan, and then I will get Christian to answer it.

Bethan: I feel like, as an A-level politics student, being on a Select Committee is a really good experience, but being able to question a Select Committee is an even cooler experience.

My question is, I guess, quite simple. Obviously, as part of the syllabus I look at the pros and cons of Government scrutiny and the role of Select Committees in that. I was wondering how effective you think you guys are at holding the Government to account.

Chair: That is a tough one. Come on, Christian.

Christian Wakeford: I was hoping you would be nice and kind. I would probably say: Ich verstehe nicht. I am a big believer in scrutiny. Being a councillor and being a chair of scrutiny before, I think good scrutiny creates good law. That is what we are here to do. Possibly we may disagree in this Committee, and certainly in the Chamber, as to what that good law should look like, but you do so by bringing Ministers in, holding them to account and actually questioning what they want to achieve from a certain policy.

For me, it is how I have dealt with it in my work life. If someone told me to go away and do a 30, 60 or 90-day plan, I would go, "No, I am doing a 90, 30, 60-day plan because I want to know where I want to be and how I am going to start and then the rest is how I get there." Therefore, for me, it is not necessarily what we spend on a service; it is the outcome you get from a service. A lot of the questions we ask as a Committee are, "What were you wanting to achieve? Are you actually going to do it by doing this?"



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Certainly, in the last year I think we have had the Secretary of State in a couple of times. Nick Gibb probably has his own parking space now for the number of times we have brought him in. Therefore, yes, we do have Ministers here. Then again, we also have those who it actually impacts, whether that is young people like yourselves or whether it is charities. We have had the teaching unions, for example, as well—I know Jonathan always has a civil conversation with them. It is about trying to represent any views of constituents, but the only way we can do so is by speaking to those it impacts, to try to represent those and make sure that the Ministers are fully aware of what the views are out there.

Chair: That is that question summed up brilliantly, Bethan. The Committee, as well as scrutinising what the Government do—and we try to do that all the time—is also a campaigning force. When we produce reports, because they are all-party we may have some discussions and maybe disagreements. However, the reports get voted on before we publish them.

A previous Committee I chaired, before the 2019 election, did a big report on special educational needs. It influenced the Government and the Government set up a review. We have done adult learning. This time we have done a lot on Covid. We campaigned for catch-up support and the Government came up with things. Therefore, the Committee can be an incredibly important body.

We are all elected. I am elected by the whole House. To be Chair, I have to go to all parties to ask for their support. The members are elected as well by their respective parties. Because we are elected we have a mandate and that makes the Committee quite important.

It will be a wonderful thing, all of you, to put on your CVs that you appeared before the House of Commons Education Committee. You have done brilliantly. I wish we were in the room because we would give you a big round of applause, but I think we are just going to do it now online like this.

Your information has been invaluable and I really wish you every possible success. You are all going to do brilliantly. I suspect some of you may even end up being MPs one day or in really good jobs. I wish you all good luck and thank you for your time. Thank you to Ladan, Emily and Ali at the school and for all you have done, Dmitrijs, Alicia and Bethan as well. It is really appreciated.