

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Accountability hearings](#), HC 82

Wednesday 1 December 2021

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Apsana Begum; Miriam Cates; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Tom Hunt; Kim Johnson; Dr Caroline Johnson; Ian Mearns.

Questions 1097-1179

Witnesses

I: Will Quince MP, Minister for Children and Families, Department for Education; Indra Morris, Director General, Children's Services, Communications & Strategy Group, DfE.

Written evidence from witnesses:



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Will Quince and Indra Morris.

Q1097 **Chair:** Good morning. For the benefit of those watching on parliamentlive.tv and the record, could you kindly introduce yourself and give your title, please?

Will Quince: I am Will Quince, the Minister for Children and Families at the Department for Education.

Indra Morris: I am Indra Morris, the director general for children's services, communications and strategy at the Department for Education.

Q1098 **Chair:** Thank you. According to the Department for Education's latest figures, as of 11 November, 130,000 of all pupils on roll in state-funded schools did not attend school for reasons related to covid-19. Are you concerned about that figure? What is the Department trying to do about it?

Will Quince: Although it is not specifically my area in the Department, understandably attendance is and always will be a key focus for the Secretary of State, and he takes a keen interest in these issues. If you look at the measures in place to tackle covid, you will have seen more recent announcements in relation to the omicron variant. Precautionary measures have been put in place such as mask wearing in communal areas now, but you can see that we are putting in place other measures such as ventilation, CO₂ monitors and regular testing to ensure that as many children and young people as possible attend education settings, because we know that that is the best place for them to be.

Q1099 **Chair:** The NASUWT has called for a circuit breaker by closing schools on or before 15 December in the run-up to Christmas. Can I confirm that the Government intend to keep schools open right up to the Christmas holidays?

Will Quince: You are tempting me well outside my brief—that is of course an issue for the Secretary of State and the Schools Minister—but I think the position of the Government is that we want to keep all education settings open. Of course, it is a matter for schools and the directors of public health locally to assess the situation in relation to covid, but we know that—I know that you know this, Chair—every day of school missed is missed learning. And in terms of things like safeguarding, which falls in my area, it is really important that, whenever possible, children are in schools—

Q1100 **Chair:** Will the schools be kept open until the Christmas holidays?

Will Quince: That is certainly our plan. We want to see schools stay open. We have put clear plans, procedures and protocols in place such as masks—I know that not everyone agrees with them, but they are a precautionary measure, given the new variant, until we know more.



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Chair: We will come to that.

Will Quince: We have put measures in place to ensure that, wherever possible, schools will—

Q1101 **Chair:** I just want to understand that you do not agree with the NASUWT.

Will Quince: We want schools to stay open.

Q1102 **Chair:** Thank you. You look after the welfare of children in schools, so this comes under you. I am sure you will be aware of reports in *The Times* among other newspapers in the past day or so about a four-year-old boy at the Wigton Infant School in Cumbria who developed hypothermia after the school put him in isolation in an outdoor classroom. What is your view about that? Has the Department contacted the school and asked why on earth a child was put in an outdoor shed that had no heating? An ambulance had to take and look after the child. Does this not give rise to significant concerns about children being put in isolation, and the numbers of those children? Given that the Government said that schools should go back to pre-pandemic behaviours, why are we facing situations where children are being put in sheds and freezing and developing hypothermia?

Will Quince: I saw that article yesterday afternoon, and we will certainly be looking into it. I would say two things. The first is to send all best wishes to the child and his family. Secondly, any response to covid has to be proportionate, and in that case I would question whether that was proportionate. Ventilation of course is important. You know, Chairman, why we have put in place the extra precautionary measure of masks in communal areas and for staff members. And we have put in the ventilation and the CO₂ monitors and we've got the regular testing. It has to be proportionate—perhaps Indra would like to say more—but I would question whether that was a proportionate response if indeed the venue was a—

Q1103 **Chair:** Children are being isolated across the country. I quoted to you that hundreds of thousands of children are being sent home. Whole year groups are still being sent home, despite the Government saying that this is not necessary. Children yet again are being denied an education. One child of four has developed hypothermia. What I want to know is: what is the Department's view about this and are they going to be contacting the schools directly? Surely you, or the Secretary of State even, should contact this school in Cumbria and say this was unacceptable.

Will Quince: I will certainly commit to raising this with the Secretary of State, whom I am seeing later today. It is always a balancing act, isn't it, between trusting and empowering schools to do the right thing, based on the local prevailing data and information at the time, for their pupils, because they know their pupils and school better than we at the Department do here in Westminster, and at the same time ensuring that the measures that are put in place are proportionate to the risk that we face? I will certainly raise this with the Secretary of State. On the face of



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it—having read the article—it’s a deeply regrettable situation, and I send the young chap all the very best wishes for a speedy recovery.

Q1104 Chair: Are you putting out guidance about isolation of children and that whole year groups should not be sent home? What I don’t understand is this. Why is it that I can go to a nightclub, but whole groups of children are sent home? Why is it that nativity plays are being cancelled, yet people can go and mix in bars? And on the mask policy, why is it that masks are not compulsory in offices, yet children are being told to wear them in school corridors? Where is all this coming from? Why is there one rule for children and one rule for everybody else?

Will Quince: You are again tempting me to go into policy areas that are outside my brief, but what I would say is that I think the overriding objective for all of us at the Department for Education is ensuring that schools stay open, and taking all proportionate steps necessary to ensure that that happens. I accept the points raised about masks and the very limited evidence as to their efficacy. But if there are small steps that we can take that are proportionate, based on the fact that we don’t know as much as we know we need to about the omicron variant and the risks that we face, and it’s a proportionate measure. I hope, Chairman, it is an abundance of caution that will enable us to keep schools open.

Q1105 Chair: In July 2021, the Department for Education responded to a written question on wearing facemasks in schools. They noted “the disadvantages” and “the negative impact on communication between teachers and pupils in the classroom, particularly for those with special educational needs, the effect on mental health, and the discomfort of wearing face coverings for prolonged periods”. What research or evidence are the Department aware of on whether mask wearing impacts on pupils’ learning, and the effect on children? Have you conducted an impact assessment to determine what the effect is on children of requiring them to wear a face mask? I’m just not clear. I always believe that I should follow the science; what I don’t understand is why they are not a requirement in offices, but you’re making children wear them in corridors.

Will Quince: Again, this is outside my brief, Chairman, so I’m no expert in this, but I think, at the moment, we just don’t know enough about the new variant. There are steps being taken at pace, internationally, to find out more about this variant. I think, on balance, it’s a precautionary measure which will help to ensure that we can keep schools open, which has to be our overriding aim here.

Q1106 Chair: But you would have, the Department for Education would have, evidenced this. What evidence is there that it helps to keep schools open?

Will Quince: At the moment, there is very limited evidence as to the efficacy of masks in educational settings.

Q1107 Chair: Yes, so why ask for it?

Will Quince: I think it’s because we’re looking at what steps we can take to try to—



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Q1108 **Chair:** So children are being used as an experiment, in other words.

Will Quince: No, it's not an experiment, Chair. The worst case, of course, is that schools would have to close, and you and I know the impact that that would have, so if there are smaller steps that we can take, just until we know more, as a precautionary measure—

Q1109 **Chair:** Then why not require people to wear masks in offices? My view is that there's an inconsistency and that children are the guinea pigs in this. And as a result, hundreds of thousands of children are still being sent home. Some are being put in cold sheds and developing hypothermia. It seems to me that children are the guinea pigs to see whether—Indra, I see you want to say something.

Indra Morris: On the point about children being sent home, as you said, we issue guidance. But we also, with our regional teams, contact both schools and the local authorities where there are sustained and particular issues around attendance, to ask why and to myth bust. We have worked with the royal colleges to make sure speech and language therapists are going into schools and providing services. The guidance is being followed up by the Department to address the issue of attendance. On face masks—

Q1110 **Chair:** Has the Department done an assessment on the effects of face masks on children's wellbeing, particularly for those kids who have special educational needs?

Indra Morris: On special educational needs, as you know, we gave discretion to schools to make the judgment on what is in the best interest of the child, given their needs. So there is discretion not to wear them.

Chair: I think Caroline and Miriam want to come in on this particular area.

Q1111 **Dr Johnson:** Thank you, Chair. I want to ask about how we keep schools open. I appreciate that as you are part of the Department for Education, not all of it is within your control, Minister. You said you want schools to remain open and that is the Government's intention, but the new rules on isolation mean that some schools are unable to staff their schools adequately and safely.

For example, *The Lincolnite* is reporting that two secondary schools in the Lincoln area have gone back to online learning this week, with several secondary school year groups—including the whole of years 9 and 10, one of which is a GCSE year—being sent home. What are you doing to try to stop that and ensure that there are staff who can move around and cover those gaps? In particular, what are you doing for the wellbeing of the disadvantaged, those with special educational needs, and children who are looked after by the care of the state? We know that it is those children who suffer the most when we send them home for online learning.

Will Quince: Those are both really good questions that largely fall outside my remit, so it might be better if I ask the Schools Minister to directly respond in writing to those points. What we do know is that covid has

placed pressure on school teaching staff, both teachers and learning assistants, and we have put funding in place to support schools with that.

For smaller schools that are not part of larger MATs, I accept that that can be a challenge. We have put in place measures across the school estate, including ventilation, CO₂ monitoring and regular testing, but fundamentally—this is where the challenge is and where Lincolnshire will have taken its own view—it is down to the local director of public health to decide what is best for their local area, based on the local data and information. Indra, do you want to add any more to that?

Indra Morris: Just to say that the workforce fund to help with pressures such as supply teachers was reopened on Monday. It is worth being aware of that.

Q1112 **Dr Johnson:** That could be helpful. What are you doing to mitigate the effects on looked-after children?

Will Quince: In what respect?

Dr Johnson: We know that those children who are most disadvantaged suffered the most from lockdown. In the event that they are among the whole year groups that have been sent home, which is likely, what are you doing to make sure that those children have access to good education?

Will Quince: The usual protocols apply. Both SEND and AP settings largely remained open throughout the pandemic, and that would remain the case. We have always prioritised children with SEND and looked-after children, and that would continue to be a priority for us. But I can certainly ask the Schools Minister to respond in writing—I will no doubt commit him to lots of things during this session—with more detail about the steps that we are taking.

Obviously, it is a fast-moving situation. The decision was taken only on Sunday, rolling into Monday. We will probably know more about the variant towards the end of this week or early into next week, and things will continue to change. It is fast-moving environment, and we regularly meet the Secretary of State and Schools Minister.

Q1113 **Miriam Cates:** I just want to push on the mask wearing from a wellbeing point of view. You are right to say there is no strong evidence that masks reduce transmission. We know that schools aren't drivers of transmission, and we know that children aren't at risk from covid. We don't know, as the Chair has said, the long-term impacts of forcing children to wear masks. There are some studies from Germany that show an increase in headaches and a decrease in mental health. We know that masks reduce the ability of someone to read someone else's emotions by threefold or more. Do you think it is ethical to introduce a policy on children that has no clear benefits but completely unknown risks?

Will Quince: I think it's a fair question. Again, it was not a decision that I took; it is largely in the remit of the Secretary of State and the Schools Minister. Fundamentally, you are talking about risks versus the impact



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that it will have on children. What we do know is that what has the biggest impact on children is if we close schools. Given that we just do not know enough about this variant at the moment—internationally, not just here in this country—on balance is it a proportionate step to ask children and adults within communal areas, within school, to wear a mask? On balance, I think it is.

Q1114 **Chair:** But not people in offices.

Will Quince: That is a question for other Government Departments, but of course we are not questioning whether offices are to close. We all know the impact that closing a school will have on children and young people. If there are small and proportionate mitigating measures that we can put in place that can avoid that happening—I appreciate that it is an “if”—I think that on balance it is the right thing to do.

Q1115 **Miriam Cates:** I see that point, but unfortunately the effect of imposing the mask mandate again has not been to give schools a sense of relief that they are being protected; it has been that they go further and start cancelling nativities and isolating children. While some might think that the guidelines are proportionate and sensible, unfortunately I have pages and pages of examples, sent by parents across the country, of schools that are not following DfE guidelines and are going well beyond them—closing schools and isolating children they should not be.

Unfortunately, I think that introducing masks again has had the opposite effect and is more likely to close schools, because it has given them the sense that they can now go further. What is the Department going to do to make sure that schools stick to the letter of the guidelines, and don't go rogue, if you like?

Will Quince: Again, I come back to the point about trusting schools, headteachers and directors of public health to make the right decision. We do not want to be overly prescriptive. We set guidance. I appreciate what you are saying, and I hear, too, that there are schools that are cancelling nativities. I find that deeply regrettable. Christmas concerts are one of the loveliest things. Unfortunately, as MPs we very rarely get to go to our children's, though we often get to see them online, but they are wonderful things. I think the Prime Minister was clear yesterday that he wants nativities and Christmas concerts wherever possible to go ahead, but there will be some areas where there is a higher prevalence of transmission, and directors of public health will say, “Actually, a big gathering probably isn't the right thing to do,” or, “If you've got parents coming into school to watch a play, wearing a mask might be a sensible precautionary measure.” Ultimately, on balance it comes down to trusting schools, headteachers and directors of public health.

Q1116 **Chair:** But schools are closing nativity plays yet people can go to nightclubs. I have always followed the science. I am not a lockdown sceptic; I am a school-down sceptic, and there's a big difference. I don't understand, because it seems that all the burden is being put on children. They seem to be suffering the most in this, without a doubt, because we allow people to go to nightclubs and bars; yet schools are closing down



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nativity plays or putting them online. I just want to understand what the Department is doing, and whether or not you are speaking to schools, regional commissioners and local authorities to ask why this is going on.

Will Quince: I have no doubt that those conversations will be being had. The guidance is clear, and I think the Secretary of State is also clear. He does not want these measures in for a minute longer than they need to be in place. We are taking a precautionary approach, given what we do not know at the moment about the new variant, but ultimately it is all about keeping schools and educational settings open.

Chair: We are going to come on to special needs in a minute, but I am going to bring in Tom.

Q1117 **Tom Hunt:** I also have concerns about young people being forced to wear face masks, particularly in the classroom, when they are sitting in there all day. I have significant concerns about communication. I get the point about leaving it in the hands of headteachers to make their own decisions, but we also have to bear in mind that often these headteachers are under significant pressure from radicalised teaching unions, which frankly on various occasions over the last 20 months seem to have adopted positions that make one wonder whether they actually really care, and whether their priority is the education of young people. Surely some further push in the Government position may strengthen the hand of headteachers who are really battling against a load of people who are intent on continuing to disrupt the education of our young people.

Will Quince: I hear what you say. I will raise it with the Secretary of State this afternoon, but as I say this is very much a precautionary measure based on the new variant. We have moved at pace, with the aim of keeping schools and educational settings open. It is in communal areas. I appreciate that some schools, sometimes with the advice of DPHs, though sometimes not, are having mask wearing in the classroom setting as well. I don't think that that is something that we are advising, but of course it is up to heads and local directors of public health to take an approach based on the data in their local area. We have to trust and empower schools, who are the leadership locally, to do what is right for their school and their community, as difficult as sometimes that might be.

Q1118 **Chair:** Just to come on to special needs, I should say that obviously I have known you for many years—you are a near-neighbour Essex MP—and I know you are a very compassionate person and a one nation Conservative. Also, I realise that you have only just taken on this brief fairly recently, and I was very pleased when you got it, but I have to say that the Department's response to solving the SEND problems that many parents and children with special educational needs have is nothing short of appalling.

I do not if you have read "Little Dorrit" by Charles Dickens, but he said of the Circumlocution Office: "The Circumlocution Office went on mechanically, every day, keeping this wonderful, all-sufficient wheel of statesmanship, How not to do it, in motion". This has gone on for two years and nearly three months, since the Department announced the



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review. Nothing has been done. You have appointed a panel to review the review, then there will be a Green Paper, which is in essence another review but more public, and that will take a long time. Could you explain what on earth has gone on? I stress again that I know you as an individual and realise that you have just taken on this role. I am not saying this is your responsibility, but I think we have let down many parents who have children with special educational needs, because we have a system that is not working and is not fit for purpose.

Will Quince: First, it is my responsibility, because I am the responsible Minister, albeit 10 weeks into the job. It is my job to now get the review over the line and in the right place, and I assure you that that is going to happen. I agree and slightly disagree with you. I agree with you that too many children and parents are being let down at present by the SEND system. There are some fundamental issues that we know we need to fix as quickly as possible. Some of those we can do things about in the short to medium term; others are more structural and will take a bit longer. I also agree that it has taken too long. I will explain a little bit why it has taken as long as it has, but where I agree with you is that I think we would all have wanted this to have been concluded a lot faster.

I also agree with you, Chair, that the Department's communication and expectation management with parents, the SEND community and stakeholders has been regrettable. We should have done better at setting expectations, given where we were and the scale of the challenge that we faced. The review was originally announced, I think, in September 2019. It started at pace and was going very well. Of course, then we hit covid. The review was then started again in March—

Q1119 **Chair:** I accept what you are saying, but you can't blame covid for this, because other Departments have managed to pass very important things. In fact, the lifetime skills guarantee and all that has come through, so when the Department treats it as a priority, things can get done. I know it will change under you, but two years and three months just seems like putting children with special educational needs on the back burner.

Will Quince: For the Department for Education, I don't think it ever was, to be fair, and officials have worked so hard on this behind the scenes. I can see the work that has been done, and largely I am picking up a piece of work that has huge amounts of data, evidence and stakeholder engagement behind it. So it is not like we are starting from scratch at this point, but where I would disagree with you, Chair, is that if you take the skills work, that was wholly within the gift of the Department for Education. Unfortunately, this isn't. Part of the problem with the SEND system at the moment is its dysfunctional nature, in that it needs the Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care in particular, and indeed DLUHC to work hand in hand. The reason why I would push back on the covid point is that, understandably, the Department of Health and Social Care has been up to here, rightly, with dealing with the pandemic and its impact. We are not able to progress the SEND review at the pace we would have wanted to without DHSC being as involved as we are.



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Q1120 Chair: You all know what needs to be done, and our predecessor Committee—I also chaired that, and Ian was also a member of it—conducted possibly the biggest ever inquiry historically by any Select Committee, or so I have been told, and the Government welcomed that. There were a lot of recommendations in there. Perhaps one of the most important recommendations was offering parents a neutral advocate to help them navigate the treacle of incredibly unkind bureaucracy. What is your view on our Select Committee report, and on that recommendation?

Ian Mearns: Before you answer that, Minister, I add that that report, which was produced by this Committee just over two years ago, was very well received by people out there in the field. That in itself should be a guide that its recommendations should be taken seriously.

Chair: And why does it need to go from a two-year review to a panel reviewing the review to a Green Paper? Why not just turn it into a White Paper and do stuff, rather than just talking about it?

Will Quince: Those are all fair points. The first thing I would say is that if we look at some of the challenges we face—parental confidence, the need to improve outcomes for children and young people significantly, an improved experience of the SEND system for children, young people and parents, ensuring financial sustainability and, importantly, national consistency in provision—a lot of that was already in the report. We know the challenges we face. Of course, how you deliver on that, and take as many people as possible with you, is the challenge that we face.

That is where the point about the steering review is key. I hear what you say about a panel reviewing a review, but that is not what it is at all. The steering group is ensuring that—I do not want to end up in the spring of next year having committed to publishing—

Q1121 Chair: What is the date? When is it coming?

Will Quince: We have committed to publishing the review in the first quarter of next year, and you will hold me to account on that, Chair; no doubt I will be back here in the spring.

Q1122 Chair: Why not publish it as a White Paper?

Will Quince: There is a good reason for that, but let me answer the steering point question first. I do not want to get to the spring and launch this Green Paper and consultation, and then stakeholders understandably say to me, “Well, hang on, what about this? What about that? These are the unintended consequences you’ve missed.” Now, there will be some of that, inevitably; that’s why you have a consultation as part of a Green Paper. But where you have a steering review of experts in the field, they are helping to guide us through that process and identify any areas that we are absolutely on track with, and any areas—

Q1123 Chair: They have done that over the past two and a bit years.

Will Quince: Yes, and I accept that, but I have come in, Chairman; we have got some brilliant officials behind us. We know what we need to achieve. We now have a clear timeline to deliver that. I have a steering



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group because I don't want to get to spring and then have you say to me, "This is just not up to scratch," and the steering review will help us to deliver in that regard.

On the Green Paper point, if I may, because of the scale of what we are looking to do, it is a huge overhaul of the SEND system. That is why a Green Paper will have a full consultation.

Q1124 Chair: Just to be very clear, though, when are you actually publishing the review?

Will Quince: It will be in the first quarter of next year.

Q1125 Chair: Right. And the Green Paper?

Will Quince: At the same time. That will then launch a consultation process. I expect a three-month consultation, which is the standard—

Q1126 Chair: How much work have you done drawing on the Select Committee report? The recommendation I mentioned on a neutral advocate—is the Department well disposed towards that? Maybe you want to answer this, Indra; I think you were looking at me.

Indra Morris: I was looking at you from the implementation perspective, because that was one of the key recommendations and challenges that you put to us in terms of lessons for 2014. That comes back to the role of the steering group, both in shaping and testing the options and the content of the Green Paper and the consultation, but also with regard to the challenge on deliverability, because, as you know, it is a very complex system, involving lots of different parts of health, education and local government. The steering group is not to review the review; it is a set of committed leaders who are there to help us both shape and deliver successfully.

Will Quince: Can I answer the advocate point as well, because I certainly understand what you are saying about it?

Chair: Yes, and then I will bring in Tom.

Will Quince: The reason I think you are calling for that is that at the moment, there is a bit of a minefield for parents regarding the expectation in different local authorities as to the level of support that parents are entitled to and should expect. The key for us is addressing that, but I will take away and look very seriously at the advocate point. More broadly, I know the Committee has recommended in the past that we look at fostering better outcomes around children's advocates more generally. I will take away that point and look at it in some detail.

Q1127 Tom Hunt: I know you are passionate about special educational needs; of course, I have had the benefit of your already visiting my constituency to see some of the work going on in Ipswich in that new unit in the mainstream. I have not given up on my desire for you to visit the Sir Bobby Robson School, so I will be putting in another email or WhatsApp about that in the not-too-distant future.



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However, I have a couple of big questions. We see on this Committee, not just through a SEND review but in inquiry after inquiry, how important it is to get SEND right. We are doing a prison education inquiry, where we are establishing the fact that probably 30% to 40% of all those in prison have some kind of learning disability. We are doing a children in care inquiry, where we are finding out that about 50% of them have special educational needs. Often, the insurmountable pressure put on families through needs not being met has led to the children ending up in care. We know that this is a societal priority—not just a priority for those families and young people, but for the whole of society. The stakes are incredibly high.

I welcome the extra money from the Treasury in the Budget for special educational needs, but I don't think it goes far enough. As a Minister for this area, I know it is a difficult question that you might not be able to answer as directly as I would like, but to what extent do you feel the Treasury and other Government Departments have a really big picture on the importance of funding SEND? To what extent do they see it as an investment and not just spending? To what extent do they see it as linked to so many other sorts of things?

Will Quince: I had a really enjoyable day with you in Ipswich visiting schools, so thank you for the opportunity. More than ever, I think the Treasury really do get the importance of this. There are a couple of reasons why. First, they see the importance of getting SEND right because they recognise, and we have been telling them, that there are significant issues with the process. Secondly, they look at the high needs budget going up by 10% every year, and they think, "Is this sustainable, and what are you doing to ensure that that is targeted and effective?" How can we be spending 10% extra every year and have so many parents and children not getting better outcomes or being happy with the system?

I met the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury last week, and they both raised the issue of SEND and the extra money that we are putting in. What has been game changing is not just the high needs budget as part of the core schools grant and the additional £4.7 billion that is going into that, but the capital funding that is the key bit—the £2.6 billion. If we are going to transform the SEND system, we have to, as part of that, really look at mainstream.

Part of that £2.6 billion will, rightly, build more special schools, because we know that that provision will always be required, but at the same time, how do we get better at early identification? How do we ensure more children are not spending an hour a day each way in a taxi going to a school that might not be the right one for them? They would much rather be in their local community attending their local school. Can we build new units within mainstream schools, like the ones we visited? In effect, it might be that a child needs one hour a day in the unit within the mainstream setting and then goes back into their classroom, or it might be that they need to spend the whole day there. The key thing is that they still spend lunchtime there and go to the same parties, and see their friends after school. They feel included in the mainstream school setting.

That will not work for everyone, but the point is that that £2.6 billion is game-changing. It is the first piece in the jigsaw to deliver the SEND review in the first quarter of next year.

Q1128 Tom Hunt: I agree. It is special schools and better provision in mainstream settings. In terms of early identification, we know that early diagnosis is incredibly important. It was only when my school found out what was wrong with me that I got the support that I needed. The concern that I have about dyslexics is that it is thought that around 80% of people leave school not knowing they are dyslexic. We don't universally screen all schoolchildren for dyslexia. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk, a county colleague, is doing a 10-minute rule Bill on this as a fellow dyslexic. Is universal screening of all schoolchildren to see whether they have dyslexia something that the Government would consider?

Will Quince: I know that the right hon. Member for West Suffolk is speaking to the Secretary of State, and I know that he has a 10-minute rule Bill coming up. We will look at that closely. Apart from that investment in mainstream, which is key, it is about investment in workforce, which is also key. You can look at the additional £70-plus million that I think we put into autism and early identification. We are doing something similar with around £2 million for the whole school SEND consortium, which is all about delivering high-quality teaching for children and young people.

We are looking also, as part of the SEND review, at what more we need to do around SENCO. At the moment, you don't have to get the SENCO qualification until up to three years in post; we are looking at that, for example. We are looking at how we can upskill all teachers, not to be SENCOs but to have more skilled teachers, whether it is in initial teacher training or as part of ongoing professional development. The better you equip your workforce to identify somebody's needs early on—dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism—the earlier you can put in interventions to help, and that has to start in early years settings, not just in schools.

Q1129 Tom Hunt: I get that it is all about an appreciation of the fact that not all young people process information in the same way. Frankly, sometimes their brains are wired a bit differently, and sometimes that can be a good thing—if they get the support they need.

Will Quince: Yes. This is absolutely critical. My instinct on the SEND review is that we have to move from late intervention and acute need, to early intervention and getting support. That is where you get the proper buy-in from parents. If they feel confident that their child's additional needs have been identified and they are getting the support that they need, in either mainstream or specialist settings, then they are not going to feel the need to fight the system and push for an HCP. An HCP leads to a more expensive outcome and an outcome that is not necessarily the best for the child. We could have intervened a lot earlier and got them the support.



Q1130 Tom Hunt: I completely agree. I will make one final point, which is to do with funding disparities, and then I will be quiet for a while. I have spoken to you about this before; I gave you a letter when you visited about how there is a multi-academy trust that has a school in Tower Hamlets and a school in Ipswich, and how the funding per head between the two is dramatically different. This difference is there not just when compared to Tower Hamlets, but also when compared to Norfolk. I was with the cabinet member at the county council who is responsible for SEND; the average SEND child in Suffolk gets £56 per head less than a child in Norfolk. This is statistically incredible. I would be interested to know if there is any local education authority in the country that gets a worse deal than Suffolk when it comes to funding per head for young people with special educational needs. It seems bizarre to me; I do not understand why a young person in Ipswich with special needs can get any less per head than somebody somewhere else. I do not want anyone else to get less—I just want kids in my area to get the same.

Will Quince: This is the feedback we often get from parents and parent-carer forums; it is a postcode lottery, and there is a huge inconsistency. That is one of the big issues that we have to address.

Q1131 Chair: You mentioned local councils, but I am not talking about funding. I strongly welcome the £2.6 billion capital fund, but it is for capital funding. As you well know, it is not just about money; it is about how hundreds of millions of pounds have been spent on the system in the past, and yet it is still not working. *Schools Week* found that Ofsted completed 16 local area SEND inspections since May; of the eight areas visited for the first time, seven were told to produce a written statement of action because of significant areas of weakness. Another eight councils already found to be failing were revisited; just two of them had made sufficient progress in all their areas of weakness. I think that shows the state of play. The reason that I feel frustrated is that the Department has allowed this to go on. You mentioned a postcode lottery; parents of children with special educational needs should not have to face a postcode lottery. Levelling up should be about children with special educational needs as well, not just focused on academic capital. My feeling is that it is not a priority for the Department to sort out.

Will Quince: Sorting this out is absolutely a priority for both me and the Department. I want every single child in this country to achieve their potential, regardless of their challenge. That means ensuring that every child with SEND is able to achieve their potential—that has to be at the very heart of it. It is an interesting point on local authority inspections. However, when you look at the written statement of actions, it is not a pass or fail when Ofsted go and inspect a local authority; it is about looking to make improvements. They identify areas of strength and they also identify areas of weakness—they see where improvements need to be made. It is an important part of the process. Where we need to, we put additional resources into local authorities—I do not know if we call them commissioners or advisers. I was speaking with Stoke yesterday—

Q1132 Chair: The fact is that too many of these councils are not delivering.



Will Quince: They are not delivering in specific areas, but we work very closely with them to help address that. We also buddy them with other local authorities that are doing SEND in a different way.

Indra Morris: There are 49 local authorities that we are working closely with, to varying degrees. Birmingham is one of the most significant councils where we have put in a commissioner, John Coughlan, former CEO of Hampshire. There are another 31 local authorities—although there is a bit of an overlap between the two categories—where their timeliness is below par. Again, we are engaging with them. We vary that, depending on the seriousness, and indeed on the engagement and commitment of the local leadership. Both the political and executive local leadership, as you know, is critical.

Chair: As our report highlighted, it varies from local authority to local authority. We will go to maintained nursery schools.

Q1133 **Ian Mearns:** There are about 400 maintained nursery schools across the local authorities in the country. I have to declare an interest: I am a member of the all-party group for nursery schools, nursery and reception classes. Maintained nursery schools deliver consistently high outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, but face financial difficulties and have been doing so for some time. The three-year funding settlement from next year is welcome, but what assurances will you give to providers, many of which will struggle to stay afloat until that funding is released? What guarantees will you give to maintained nursery schools about their financial security beyond 2025? This is a problem that we have been wrestling with, that the Department are well aware of and that the new Secretary of State is certainly well aware of. Will this be another one of your priorities, Will?

Will Quince: The answer is yes. I should probably declare an interest as well, because I met some members of the APPG for maintained nursery schools only yesterday. We had a good session discussing some of the issues. It was not my first. I have met representatives of maintained nursery schools. I recognise their importance, and they are very different from other early years settings: they have a headteacher, qualified teachers and a SENCO—it is a very different environment. I also recognise that they are often in areas of higher social deprivation—not exclusively—and often cater for a higher prevalence of disadvantaged children. I recognise their importance.

They will benefit from the early years entitlement uplift more broadly—the £160 million, £180 million and the £170 million—throughout the spending review period. In addition, there is the top-up, which is £60 million specifically for maintained nursery schools. The challenge with maintained nursery schools is twofold: first, whether the quantum, the £60 million, is sufficient to meet the needs of the additional financial pressures on maintained nursery schools; and, secondly, the formula, which I know is an issue that dates back to 2016-17 and means that there is a disparity—in some cases, I think, of up to £9—between a couple of local authorities



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in central London and others around the country. I think Birmingham has the highest number of maintained nursery schools across its area.

I am looking at this very closely. I am keen to find a resolution. I think I have committed to visit maintained nursery schools and to meet the APPG in person, to see what more we can do. But you are right to say that both the Secretary of State and I are alive to the issue. We will, no doubt, be looking at it in depth and having conversations with Her Majesty's Treasury.

Q1134 Ian Mearns: It is well that you do that. Having an advocate in the DfE to help negotiate with the Treasury is vital. But you are a new Minister, Will—I am glad to see you in your place—so will you outline quickly for us what your vision is for the service, in a not hugely long answer? I come from an area where, in real terms, the local authority's spending power has been reduced by 50% since 2010, but the needs—particularly in the area of children's services and their demands—have grown significantly. Of course, therefore, the local authority will be rightly criticised if they do not prioritise children's services, but at the same time the need in adult social care has grown dramatically. Given the level of the overall reduction in spending power, if the local authority in Gateshead did not spend a penny on any other service, it would still have to make cuts in adult social care and children's services to balance the books going forward. To make sure that the children in an area like mine aren't completely missing out on all the things they need, which covid has thrown into stark relief, what will you, as Children's Minister, be saying to the Treasury about making sure that local authorities in places like mine are properly funded to deliver those services?

Will Quince: It is a really good question. My job is, in part, to be a champion and advocate for children and young people across Government, and to raise all these issues. You will know from my two and a half years at the Department for Work and Pensions that I was knocking regularly at the door of the Chancellor of the Exchequer—not that he was always that willing to open it, because we were asking for very large sums.

I actually feel really optimistic about this area. I think it is a priority area for both the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. If you look at the spending review settlement, it was really positive in this space, whether that is the £4.8 billion of new grant funding for local authorities over the spending review period, to fund children's services and social care; the £200 million uplift to the supported families programme, in effect doubling the amount of money, which will enable us to reach another 300,000 families with that programme; the £104 million for us to tackle unregulated provision; the investment in family hubs and the early start offer. I actually think we are in a really good place. There is extra money for secure and open children's homes—an extra £259 million. I think there is cause for optimism, but don't think for a moment that I won't be banging on the Chancellor's door once again when I think it necessary.

Q1135 Ian Mearns: I thank you for that. I hope that your predictions about the money and its distribution come to fruition. The other aspect, in terms of



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delivering that whole agenda, is making sure that we have the appropriately trained and qualified workforce. Recruitment and retention across the field of a quality workforce is vital to deliver that vision. Do you think we are there yet?

Will Quince: The answer is no, because I think covid has presented us with some real challenges, especially in the children's social care space. Indra might be able to correct me, but I think we have invested about £50 million every year for recruitment and development of child social workers. I think it is something we are always alive to. Covid has put incredible pressure on the system, hence why I regularly meet and will continue to meet, for example, the Association of Directors of Children's Services. I don't think I have ever turned down a meeting with a colleague and I never intend to. Likewise, as much as possible, I meet leaders of councils and local authorities to ensure that where there are pressures—I have no doubt they will be forthcoming in letting us know when there are challenges that they face. Workforce is absolutely key and is something that I am very much alive to.

Q1136 **Ian Mearns:** And it is not in a vacuum, inasmuch as the jobs market is becoming very tight in many places. Of course, there is a lure out there for people to go and do different things, because the financial incentives are there to do so.

Will Quince: There is, and I think that is right. I always take an approach to staffing and workforce that is twofold. The first point is recruitment and the second is retention. In part, it is about money, but it is also about feeling valued and about investing in them and their continued professional development and showing that there is progression within an organisation.

Q1137 **Ian Mearns:** You cover such a wide brief. You have nursery schools, nursery classes, children's centres, the new hubs, social work staff and support staff in schools. That is a fairly wide brief in which to try and secure that recruitment and retention and workforce development.

Will Quince: That is right. It is a huge brief, as the Secretary of State reminds me; I recognised it when I was preparing for this session, too.

At the same time, in the past 10 weeks, I have spent, much to the annoyance, I suspect, of officials, as much of it as I can outside the Department, in schools, in early education settings—I love visiting nurseries and early education settings; it is just brilliant—and also local authorities. I have been out meeting social workers. The more you get out and listen to people at the grassroots, that is how you understand the pressures and the challenges—not just now, but what is coming down the line. Part of my job is not to sit in the ivory tower of the Department for Education, but to be out there listening and understanding what the challenges are and then coming back to the Department and seeing what more we can do.

Chair: Got it.



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Q1138 **Ian Mearns:** One more from me—you might not know that one of my favourite areas of discourse in this Committee is opportunity areas, which I gather you have inherited.

Will Quince: I have, yes—added to the portfolio.

Q1139 **Ian Mearns:** Of course, you will know that 12 OAs were developed, but there wasn't one anywhere in the north-east of England. When he was Secretary of State, Damian Hinds announced, in my constituency, an opportunity fund for the north-east of England. Very little of that has been spent in my constituency, despite the fact that it was launched there.

Will Quince: I met him last week, actually.

Q1140 **Ian Mearns:** Do you have any plans for opportunity areas—for that programme—such as reviewing it and ensuring that the areas that missed out will actually get an opportunity?

Will Quince: We want every area of the country to have opportunity, and education is at the very heart of that. What we are doing at the moment—I have been to two of our opportunity areas so far. I have spoken with one, but I have been to Blackpool and to Ipswich and I hope to go to more. We now have to do the process of looking at that programme and assessing the outcomes—whether it was good value for money, and I know that there are views on both sides of the fence on that.

Looking at the outcomes is key—taking an evidence-based approach. The Secretary of State constantly says, "Data and evidence: that's what has to drive us at this Department." We are looking very closely at our spending review settlement, so I cannot make any announcement today about what the future of opportunity areas may or may not be, but we are looking very closely at the funding settlement and seeing what more we can do. I think the key to it—the thing I have picked up in all the areas I have spoken to so far—is leadership. Leadership and collaboration are at the heart of everything.

Q1141 **Chair:** You spent £100 million on a few areas. That money could have gone to funding leadership in disadvantaged areas, rather than putting £100 million in a few places. Perhaps that money could have been better spent.

Indra Morris: Opportunity areas are also twinning with other areas to share the learning and spread that, too.

Ian Mearns: Evidence on that is a bit flimsy though, isn't it?

Chair: Yes—

Indra Morris: It is early days on that front.

Q1142 **Chair:** —and on the outcomes. Is it possible that you could send us the updated outcomes?



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Will Quince: We certainly can, but I have just three in front of me. Early years outcomes for disadvantaged pupils improved in nine of the 12 OAs. Phonics results have improved, overall, in 10 of the 12, and key stage 2 combined attainment data improved by more than the national rate in 10 of the 12.

However, it is not just about that—it is not just about those areas. As Indra rightly says, it is about how you then share that best practice and evidence with other areas. It is also almost like a pilot project. It was trialling processes—getting schools working together, collaboratively, in an area—which could ultimately work in other areas and save money.

Chair: Thank you. I will bring in Kim, then Miriam.

Q1143 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, guys. My question is on family hubs. When Sure Starts were developed, they tackled childhood poverty and did very well. They were located in mainly disadvantaged parts of the country.

What is your view on family hubs being located in the most deprived areas, so that we improve opportunities for those children in those locations? Do you see those family hubs being located in schools or in other centres, or do you see them as new capital build projects to be developed?

Will Quince: Those are great questions. I think the first part of that is around whether family hubs are about just socially deprived areas and areas that are most disadvantaged. No, they are not; this is about having them everywhere. In a local authority area, we want to have them everywhere. However, of course, local authorities would want to focus additional resource on the most socially deprived and disadvantaged areas—I would be amazed if they didn't—because those are the children and young people for whom we really need to turn the dial, in terms of their life chances.

We are starting off with 12 family hubs as part of the transformation programme, then a further 75, so we will get to just over half of all local authorities as part of this spending review period. I am still working through the criteria on how we will allocate that funding.

On whether we will focus the programme specifically on local authorities that are highest on the social deprivation index, I suspect that will be a focus, but a key to it—and there is a caveat—is that the local authority in question must be completely bought into, and have a real vision for, a family hubs model and delivery thereof. I think most of them are getting into that place.

The family hubs model—if you like—is all about access, connections and relationships. On the delivery of it, I won't be overly prescriptive about what local authorities do. To be honest, I do not see it as being about big, shiny new buildings; it is more about services and provision in localities that people can access. It is not even just about buildings; it is about digital and about people knowing what they can access and where they can access it in their local community. We are going to completely trust



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and empower local authorities to deliver the family hubs model in their community. They might use schools, church groups, charities or Sure Start centres, but we are going to empower local authorities to do it.

There is already some really good practice. The lead on this will be the National Centre for Family Hubs, which is being led by the Anna Freud Centre, and it will show what best practice is. Hence, we have the transformation fund for the first 12, which will show us what can be done and really deliver on the “best start” agenda being led by Dame Andrea Leadsom.

Q1144 Kim Johnson: Do you have a date for the roll-out of the first 12?

Will Quince: Yes—well, I say yes, but the answer is no. We have announced the transformation fund for the first 12. We are starting to look at those now. The key to this is that I do not want to rush it and say that we want these things opened as quickly as possible; they have got to be right. That means giving local authorities the time and space to deliver a family hub model that really works for their community.

For me, the plan is that in the early part of next year, we will be able to announce the criteria and the process for the allocation of funding. I am still open-minded about whether that is a bidding process or just a funding allocation process. I am speaking to local authorities about what they would prefer, but I think they are already starting to think about a family hub model. We have a very good one in Essex, Chair—

Chair: In Harlow.

Will Quince: In Harlow, exactly.

Chair: It has been visited by the Secretary of State on a number of occasions.

Will Quince: And there is one in my constituency. The model is proven, but it will be done ever so slightly differently in all local authorities.

Q1145 Kim Johnson: It will be interesting to see whether you focus on any of those local authorities that have suffered over the past 11 years as a result of austerity and lost significant amounts of funding, which has impacted on their ability to deliver these types of services.

Will Quince: I would like to think—in fact, I would hope—that the local authorities that face the biggest challenges and pressures will put in the most ambitious applications or bids for the family hub model money.

Q1146 Miriam Cates: Just to declare an interest, I have been on the parliamentary advisory board for the Leadsom review, so I am absolutely delighted with the family hubs announcement.

The UK has the highest family breakdown rate in the OECD, I believe, and that disproportionately affects children in poorer families. In the poorest families, only 47% of under-fives live with both parents, whereas the proportion is 85% in the higher income brackets. One of the asks we



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have of family hubs is to provide relationship support. Obviously, if we can keep more couples together, it will have an impact on the outcomes in terms of education and mental health. Particularly for boys, having a male role model is proven to be very important.

How do you see family hubs delivering that? What role will the Department play in making sure that they do deliver it, and that it is not an option that some family hubs choose and others do not?

Will Quince: It is a really good question. I agree with you on the importance of male role models, which unfortunately are lacking in too many families. We will not be overly prescriptive, but most local authorities will include parenting support, which will be DfE-provided within the family hub model. We want the family hubs to be as inclusive and wide-ranging as possible. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions has the reducing parental conflict programme, which was briefly part of my portfolio when I was first appointed Minister. That is exactly the sort of programme, being part digital and part face-to-face, that could be delivered through the family hub model.

The other thing about family hubs is that they are not just for the nought to fives, as Sure Start centres were; they are for the whole family, including much older children and young people. It is very important that, wherever possible, we get the father or the male figure in the family involved. Although we will not prescribe it, personally I would like to see other things. Why couldn't a family hub centre, for example, be the place where you go to register the birth? That is one of the few occasions when the dad has to go, because he has to if he wants to be on the birth certificate.

I want local authorities and other Government Departments and agencies to start thinking about, "How can we fit in and slot in to a family hub model?" and make it a brilliant one-stop shop for families in communities to get all the support they need in one place, so they don't have to tell multiple agencies and Government Departments their whole life story every time they need support or want to access services.

Q1147 **Miriam Cates:** I have just one more question. The spending review gives a relatively short period of time to prove the success of a significant change, but I know the Government intend to roll it out more widely if it is successful. I asked the Prime Minister that in PMQs last week, and he confirmed it, which is brilliant. What measures will you use to determine whether they have been successful, given that relatively short proving period for something so significant?

Will Quince: That is a really good question. We have two things. I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister announce our ambition to extend it to the whole country—at the moment, we have funding for just over half. We built into the initial transformation an evaluation innovation fund, to build the evidence base. The 12 trailblazer sites, alongside Essex and others that are already doing this really well, will help us to build that evidence base. The challenge to all the local authorities in putting their bids together is to be bold, be ambitious, show us what can be done, because



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there is no greater tool in my arsenal than going to the Treasury and saying, "Look what can be achieved because local authorities are doing this on the ground. Let's have the additional money now to roll it out to the rest of the country." The onus is on local authorities to give me the evidence needed to roll it out across the whole country.

Q1148 Tom Hunt: On opportunity areas, you mentioned your visit to one in Ipswich. We are pleased to be one of the 12. It has worked very well in Ipswich and we are also pleased that it was extended. As you heard during your visit to Ipswich, the concern is that, although it has been great from the extra funding point of view and because of the collaboration, the transference of best practice and providing a forum for leaders to come together, there is a question about what the long-term benefit will be. What we do not want is a cliff-edge moment when the funding stops and everything great that has been built up stops. Is there a strategy to ensure that the gains are bedded in and made permanent in the opportunity areas where they have been operating?

Will Quince: It is a fair question, but one I cannot answer today because we are still reviewing our spending review settlement. But don't underestimate the impact that has already been had, which I have seen in Ipswich and Blackpool. It has largely done its job already in terms of getting schools to collaborate, talk together and work together. For example, in Blackpool, too many children were being excluded from one school, and they would, in effect, work around every school in Blackpool before ending up in the PRU and then going to alternative provision, whereas now schools are working together, with one saying, "I have this pupil. I'm not sure this is the right school," and the other saying, "Actually, I've got some really good facilities and I think they would thrive in my school." They are working together, and their exclusion rate has plummeted as a result, which is obviously brilliant. You see similar things in Ipswich, where headteachers were telling me they had never worked more closely and collaboratively, even though they are not in the same multi-academy trust, which is fantastic to hear. I know that will continue.

We have to look at the outcomes, review the successes and what did not go so well, and where we can embed the learning in local areas. We are also buddying up with other local authorities to share best practice. I hope that in the new year I will be able to share with you plans for what comes next, but we are still looking in detail and I have negotiations ongoing with the Secretary of State about what comes next, given the spending review settlement we achieved.

Q1149 Apsana Begum: I will start by asking what is your view on why pupils from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds and disabled children continue to be more likely to be excluded from schools?

Will Quince: Exclusions are a massive issue, which the Secretary of State and I are very keen to tackle. In part, we need to look at the root causes of exclusion. As Tom Hunt rightly pointed out, often exclusion is driven by behaviour, but that behaviour itself has a root cause and it is a matter of getting to the bottom of those root causes. In some cases it might be

family driven, but in too many cases it is down to undiagnosed or unsupported needs, whether special educational needs or emotional needs; or there is some other underlying root cause that we need to get to the bottom of. We are looking at alternative provision and the drivers thereof as part of the SEND review and early identification. We have behaviour hubs as well. I understand your keenness to focus on particular cohorts and groups, but actually the key to this, if you look at the data and the evidence, is to create calm, orderly, safe and supportive school environments for everyone, because that is where all pupils thrive. I know that Minister Walker, as part of the schools White Paper, is looking very closely at and reviewing behaviour guidance, and we see this as very much at the heart of getting to the root problems of behaviour, which will enable us then to get to the bottom of exclusions.

Q1150 Apsana Begum: The Timpson review was in 2019, and that made 30 recommendations to actively take forward tackling this issue. How many of those recommendations have been implemented and is there a measure of progress? One of the issues that the Committee recognises is the lack of data and statistics, and of measuring and monitoring of the issue.

Will Quince: As I say, we are consulting on revisions to the school behaviour guidance and the school exclusion guidance, and we hope to be able to issue more about that in due course. Some of the other measures include, for example, the behaviour hubs programme, which is a £10 million investment. We have also reformed training as part of the early careers framework, because teachers often say to us that one reason they are concerned and are thinking about leaving the profession is behaviour in the classroom. I always reference the SEND review and do not talk enough about AP, but AP is a critical part of the SEND review. If we are going to deliver on improved outcomes for children and young people in AP, it has to be part of the SEND review, and we will look closely at a lot of the Timpson recommendations as part of that.

Q1151 Apsana Begum: May I just mention one specific recommendation? It says that “To increase transparency of when children move out of schools, where they move to and why, pupil moves should be systematically tracked.” I would like to get some reassurance for the Committee that you will really look into this, because one of the gaping holes is that there is not enough information about what is happening; it is not being recorded. The Department in 2018, in response to the review, had said that there would be a clampdown on off-rolling. I would like to get an understanding of where you stand on that.

Will Quince: To be clear, off-rolling is wrong and should not be happening. More broadly, my Secretary of State is a data obsessive—which will not be a surprise, given his previous career and the fact that he was the Vaccines Minister—and rightly so, because he knows that evidence and data are key to us driving improvements, and key for going to the



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Treasury because we can demonstrate outcomes and ask for money based on evidence. So we are absolutely looking at what more we can do.

The Blackpool model is all about data and how you can work together as a school community around exclusion, which is why they have seen a drop in their PRU from 350 to under 100 pupils.

Q1152 Apsana Begum: On alternative provision, the Committee has previously looked at the correlation between knife crime and exclusions and seen a really clear correlation, but pupil referral units are not available widely enough. There are also concerns from Ofsted about what is happening in alternative provision units. Does the Department have plans to introduce mandatory registration of all alternative provision?

Will Quince: The answer is yes: I am looking at this very closely. I met with Amanda Spielman, the chief inspector, and I saw her article the next day—she did not raise it at the meeting. I will discuss it with her in more detail.

There are very good reasons why there is some provision that is not regulated at the moment. Say, for example, you are a pupil in AP and your passion—Chair, you mentioned social capital, and it is not just about academic standards and grades and core subjects—is in mechanics and engineering, and in AP schools they say, “You know what? There is a garage down the road and one of our guys can go there for one day a week, and he loves it and he will thrive, because this is what he is desperate to do.” Do we really want them to be inspected by—

Chair: You can have lighter inspection—

Will Quince: You are exactly right, and that is exactly what I will explore. At the moment it is down to schools and local authorities, in effect, to ensure that that provision is suitable for the child or young person, and that they are getting the education that they need. For some, that could be the ideal outcome, because it is all about social capital and equipping that young person for the rest of their life. I will definitely look at light touch, but I do not want the heavy hand of Ofsted to mean that that kind, generous garage owner who is giving his time freely to this young guy, who is learning so much from that work experience, says, “Do you know? This is too much for me: I’m backing out.” The impact of that is that the young person would not get that experience, and that would be tragic. Getting the balance right is key.

Q1153 Chair: Before I bring in Tom, why is that just six of the 30 recommendations of the Timpson review have been implemented?

Will Quince: I think, in part, it is because we are still looking at them. AP, which is at the heart of a lot of this, is a key part of the SEND review, which—as you know, and rightly chastised us for—is very much delayed. We will be looking at that in the round as part of the SEND review. Indra, is that fair?



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Indra Morris: Yes, and we will be consulting on the behavioural guidance relatively shortly too.

Q1154 **Chair:** The Government agreed some time ago to adopt all the recommendations of the Timpson review, so why not just adopt them? You don't need to look at them. You said yourselves that you want to do it.

Indra Morris: Some of them are in train, such as the school guidance and the behaviour hubs; some of them are absolutely key to the SEND review and the focus on AP.

Q1155 **Chair:** Are you not concerned that 42 children are being excluded every day from our schools?

Will Quince: Absolutely, yes.

Q1156 **Chair:** Permanent exclusions have increased by 5%, while suspensions have increased by 14%. We know that 60% of prisoners were excluded as children. Just like children with special educational needs, it seems that excluded children are being left behind because of a lack of action.

Indra Morris: I would question the lack of action. As the Minister said, one of the key things around exclusions is equipping headteachers and others to manage behaviour and support children in the most effective way, so that exclusions are not necessary in the first place. It is a kind of prevention agenda as well. Then, if a child is excluded for good reason, the challenge is making sure that the provision in AP, for example, is good quality and is supportive. The behaviour work—which is live; it has already started, and we will follow up with the guidance shortly—is important.

Q1157 **Chair:** When do you expect to implement all the Timpson recommendations?

Will Quince: It will almost certainly be as part of the SEND review—so in the first quarter of next year—and as part of the schools White Paper. I have visited AP settings; I think I am visiting one tomorrow. As Indra said, the key is that we want to see as few exclusions as possible. It should be very much a last resort. However, being excluded from school does not mean being excluded from education. We have to ensure that the child or young person still has a high-quality education that meets their needs, whether that is in an AP setting or otherwise. I want AP, as much as possible, to be a conveyor belt back into mainstream school; wherever possible, it should be a short-term measure.

Chair: Michael Wilshaw—who is seen as quite a traditionalist; he is not seen as being on the progressive wing of the education debate—came to our Committee and said that there should be much more support for learning support units in schools and much better teacher training, so that children are not excluded. Again, we know there is a postcode-lottery provision of PRUs and alternative provision; just 5% get A to C grades in maths and English.



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Will Quince: A couple of weeks ago, I was at Highfield Leadership Academy in Blackpool, which has something called the Appleby Centre. It is a fantastic provision. I would love to be able to replicate that across the country.

Q1158 **Tom Hunt:** This is to do with the off-rolling point. It seems to me that if that process is occurring, the principal driver behind it is the desire to do well in Ofsted inspections; even if there are only a few examples of it happening, it seems as though that may be the reason. Certain types of pupils may be seen as a barrier to doing well with Ofsted, so schools try and off-roll them. It seems that if off-rolling is happening, that may be a driver for it.

I have raised this before in other Committees, and I raised this with the Secretary of State when he came before this Committee. I have had conversations time and again, locally, with many senior education leaders who feel that Ofsted inspections still do not do enough to create the right incentives and the right rewards for being good at SEND. Surely, we should have a framework that should really encourage being good at SEND. It sometimes seems that if a school gets a good reputation locally for being good at SEND, more parents want to send their kids there, but that comes with challenges. It seems to me that Ofsted should be all about the positive difference made for the particular young people that that school is working with. I know that the Ofsted framework is new and perhaps needs more time to bed down, but what is Ofsted's capacity to review and amend the framework if we believe it is not working, and to make sure that perhaps it goes even further in rewarding the positive difference made?

Will Quince: Broadly, I agree. That is why it is really important that the schools White Paper and the SEND review are almost hand in glove. I am working really closely with the Schools Minister and the Secretary of State on this because the SEND review will only be successful if we get mainstream right, which means every school taking a truly inclusive approach wherever possible. That means that we cannot have in the system perverse incentives or disincentives for either taking or not taking pupils with SEND. We all know that happens, don't we? Parents will look around a school and a headteacher will say—this is wrong and should not happen—"I am not quite sure this is the right school; I am not quite sure we can cater for your needs," even though it is the local school that the child's friends go to and the school could do so if they put the right measures and plans in place. We are certainly looking at what more we can do to ensure that all schools think about how we can include all pupils and make our schools as inclusive as possible.

Q1159 **Tom Hunt:** We never want there to be a conflict between teachers and school leaders wanting to do what they believe is morally right but also, not unreasonably, wanting to be professionally successful.

Will Quince: Yes. In Blackpool the week before last, I saw the most incredible multi-academy trust—I am a big fan of this model, I have to say—where they had a special school, a primary and a secondary all within



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the MAT, so running through the core of the whole multi-academy trust was inclusivity and what is right for that child, because they had experience of both mainstream and special. It was a really special, magic mix. It was incredibly impressive.

Q1160 Ian Mearns: I welcome your attitude towards alternative provision, Minister, but I am afraid that we cannot solve the problem around the country with anecdotes about individual sites of good practice, because it is the scale of the problem which we are struggling with; it undoubtedly faces local authorities and schools across the whole country. I am afraid to say that, while it seems as though off-rolling has possibly diminished a bit, it still has not gone away. In terms of the large numbers of youngsters off-rolled in the last two to three years, that horse has bolted, and an awful lot of youngsters are still outside the system, being—euphemistically—educated at home. It is as simple as that. There are a number of things that we have to do. We have to scale up the quality and level of alternative provision, but we also have to make sure that the likes of Ofsted, in inspecting schools, reward inclusion and disincentivise exclusion.

Chair: Which is Tom's point.

Will Quince: I broadly agree with that.

Q1161 Chair: Talking about exclusions, 42 children excluded every school day is pretty grim. The 160,000 autistic children are twice as likely to be excluded, and one in five parents of autistic children say that their child has been informally excluded at least once in the last two years. What is your view about that? The National Autistic Society suggests that appropriate training for teachers would make a huge difference to the number of those children being excluded, either formally or informally.

Will Quince: I think that is a fair challenge. I answered a question on this at Women and Equalities questions last week, and I also met the National Autistic Society last week as part of a SEN stakeholder session. I want every autistic young person to achieve their full potential. I know we have invested—Indra will correct me if I am wrong—just over £70 million in the cross-government national autism strategy. Coming back to Tom Hunt's point, that is all designed around promoting quick and early autism diagnosis and then putting the correct support in place. I know there are some challenges. My wife tells me regularly that often it presents far later in girls, so we know there are challenges. As part of the SEND review, we are looking at how we can improve young people's outcomes. You are absolutely right, Chair, that the key to this is improving teachers' knowledge of autism and SEND more generally. There is no question that having a teacher who knows how to support an autistic child can make them feel heard within the classroom environment, and if they feel heard and their support needs are being met, there is parental confidence and the parent will not feel they need to push for an EHCP and have the child go off to a special school, which might not be the right place for them.

Indra Morris: You made the point about teachers and professionals in the classroom. We are also planning to extend the autism-related training to



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help teachers to feel both confident and capable in supporting those children.

Chair: Before we move on to TikTok and ask you about social media, Caroline wants to come in. Then I will bring in Brendan, and we will end with children's mental health.

Q1162 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I have a couple of questions on some other areas of your brief, Minister. First, on school sport, we know the NHS recommends that children between five and 18 have 60 minutes of moderate physical activity every day, which helps with their bone growth development as well as their mental wellbeing, but that less than half of children between those ages meet that. What are you doing to improve the amount of sport activity that children have access to?

Will Quince: I am a bit of a convert to sport and physical activity and run multiple times a week, so I am passionate about this issue. If you look at what we are doing across schools, for example, the PE and sports premium, which I think is about £220 million or that sort of figure, goes directly into primary schools. We have the requirement, as you rightly point out. It is something I am looking at closely, because of the social capital point. I know we will come on to mental health and mental wellbeing, but I think school sport and extracurricular activities are key to that. I am exploring what more we can do as a Department to encourage schools to do more physical activity.

Q1163 **Chair:** Longer school days?

Will Quince: I am also looking at things such as the daily mile and other challenges. I am looking at what more we can do over the summer holidays. We have the summer reading challenge, for example, so why don't we have the summer activity challenge? We have to get kids moving. That is only part of the jigsaw—I know you are a doctor, Caroline, so you know all this, and in particular you are a specialist in children. Diet is most of it, so we are doing a lot of work on food and nutrition around RHSE, but sport and the importance of physical activity and moving is also part of it.

We have invested an extra £30 million in opening up school sport facilities, because it frustrates me so much, and all our constituencies will be the same: you will drive around a secondary school and see the AstroTurf, or the 5G or whatever they are called now, utilised in the evening by local groups and children and young people. That is brilliant, but you largely see primary schools, which also have some really good facilities, not being used. The gate is locked. That is frustrating. We want to see more of those facilities opened up for community use, which will enable more wraparound support and care, clubs and societies to use those facilities so they are not just sitting empty—not so much at this time of year, but certainly in the summer, when we have those amazing fields that are not being used.

Q1164 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I think you're right that diet is potentially more important in obesity, but exercise is important in and of itself in terms of



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young children developing strong muscles and increasing their bone density, so it is very important.

Will Quince: I completely agree.

Q1165 Dr Caroline Johnson: You talked earlier about the importance of data and outcomes when looking to get more money from the Treasury. Do you have any particular targets, and how will you ensure that it is the children who are not exercising doing some and not just the children who are exercising doing more?

Will Quince: That is a good question. I hope you will understand that, within my 10 weeks in this role, although I have set some things in train in this area, the priority has been children's social care and SEND in particular, along with childcare. I plan to spend a lot more time in the new year focusing on school sport and on food standards and nutrition.

Q1166 Dr Caroline Johnson: That is fantastic. The other question I want to ask is about neglect. We have talked about child neglect before, you and I, and it is the most common form of abuse leading to children's being on a child protection plan and the most common form that adults contact the NSPCC about, but that is particularly with younger children. In older children, neglect seems to go unnoticed, perhaps because there are ways they can mitigate some of it or make it less obvious than it is in younger children. What are you doing in local communities and at a national level to tackle child neglect?

Will Quince: Gosh. That is a really good question. We have had conversations at length about this and what roles local authorities and social services in particular can play in this area. I have had numerous conversations already with Josh MacAlister, who is leading on the care review in children's social care. I will make sure that this is high up on his agenda and radar as we approach the publication of that review in the spring of next year.

Q1167 Dr Caroline Johnson: Do you think there is adequate training in place at the moment for professionals to be able to spot neglect in children, and particularly in older children?

Will Quince: I think there is a lot, but we can always do more. One thing that I know Josh MacAlister is keen to see, and I am certainly keen to see, is more face time with social workers and families, which has been very difficult throughout the course of the pandemic but is absolutely key to all this. If there are additional training packages that we can put in place to assist with identification, I am of course happy to explore that. Do you want to come in, Indra?

Indra Morris: On the whole, we find that schools are pretty good at this. Often, the challenge is actually in much younger children, so we have also worked very closely with NHS colleagues and PHE—as was—around the role of nurses, health visitors and so on, because that sort of early-years risk, where those children may be less visible to other professionals, is a really crucial point. That is another area of focus for us.



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Q1168 Dr Caroline Johnson: It is also about the management of neglect once it is identified. I recalled and described to Will the case of a baby who was not being adequately fed, came to the hospital, gained weight, grew, got better, went home with support, did not get fed, came back in again, was not growing, was fed, went home again. The cycle repeated itself over the next 18 months before further action was taken by social care to intervene more stringently to resolve it. That child missed quite a long period of—

Will Quince: What you have hit on there is really at the heart of some of the reforms that we want to see as part of the review of children's care. We know the outcomes for children who go through the care system; they are nowhere near what they should and could be. Wherever possible, it is better, if appropriate and in a safe and loving environment, for a child to stay with their family and parent. However, we know not only that the outcomes for children in care are so often bad, but that that care is incredibly expensive. We therefore need to look at what earlier intervention we can make, because often—we have had these conversations before—parents face some real challenges and complexities, but the love is there. They want to be good parents, but they just need the support, so investing at that early stage, at an earlier opportunity, and giving them the support that they need will not only save money but lead to far better outcomes for that child and that family.

Q1169 Brendan Clarke-Smith: Good morning, Minister. I want to ask a bit about TikTok, which has been in the news quite a lot recently. Videos are being taken of teachers and uploaded as some sort of challenge, and various unfounded sexual misconduct allegations, homophobic slurs and so on have been made against them. What has the Department been doing? Have there been any discussions with TikTok about how those videos can be taken down or dealt with in future?

Will Quince: Yes, is the answer to that. I regularly meet the Children's Commissioner, who has lots of concerns about this issue. I have to say, I am deeply concerned by the abhorrent abuse that some teachers have faced on TikTok and other social media channels. It is totally unacceptable and the social media companies need to do far more to address it; they need to take action to take down that harmful content as quickly as possible.

I am pleased to say that the Secretary of State, the Children's Commissioner, the Secretary of State for DCMS and I are hosting a roundtable with the major technology companies and social media companies this afternoon, where all those issues will be raised. We will be having a very open discussion with them, setting out the challenge that we face and our expectations.

Q1170 Brendan Clarke-Smith: That is excellent. From what I have seen so far, there had been discussions, or TikTok had said it had been making an effort to take things down, but some of the school unions had made the point that that was not necessarily the reality that they had seen on the ground. It is not just TikTok; it is Facebook and Twitter where we have



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this. I suppose in the old days there were websites like Rate My Teachers. I think I was on there once or twice.

Will Quince: You are absolutely right. Although this is an acute issue at the moment around the abuse of teachers, which is abhorrent and wrong and has to stop, there are broader issues about children having access to very sexualised and inappropriate content. More broadly, it is children having access to platforms they should not have, because the companies do not have the right safeguards and processes in place to restrict by age and verify. We are rightly discussing all those things.

We are also looking at the lived experience of children and young people, because that is important, too. I attended a session with the Children's Commissioner who, to her credit, has done a lot of work with this around the "Big Ask" survey, which had more than half a million children and young people respond. She also recently held a roundtable with young people about their experiences of peer-on-peer abuse on these platforms. There is a lot to be done in this area. Of course, we have got the draft Online Safety Bill coming forward, which has a DCMS lead.

Q1171 **Chair:** On social media, we talk about TikTok. To me, parents know about well-known pornographic sites and can stop their children looking at them, but they understandably think that TikTok is harmless and is about sea shanties and that sort of thing, and some of it is. But in some ways, TikTok in particular and other social media are a Trojan horse, because there is a huge amount of sexualised content that young people see and access very easily, whatever TikTok says.

If you look at the statistics, the Prince's Trust has found teenagers' mental health damaged by heavy social media use. UNICEF found that 29% of children aged five to 15 have seen something nasty or worrying online; 19% of children aged 10 to 15 had experienced a form of online bullying. The USA congressional hearing on social media showed that Facebook knew about the harmful mental health effects that Instagram was having on young girls.

It is great that you are bringing them in to have a chat and it would be good to know the outcomes, if you could write to the Committee. What is the Department seriously doing to tackle the link between social media and poor mental health? I am astonished every time I go to a school and ask children, pupils and students, if they talk about mental health, eight or nine times out of 10 they say that problems come from social media. Will you look at the idea of establishing a mental health levy for social media giants, which could fund schools to provide mental health support and resilience for children in schools?

Will Quince: I will address the first point first, which related to sexualised content. I am a relatively big social media user; I love Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. I think it is a great way to communicate with constituents. Until I met with the Children's Commissioner and she showed me how easy it was to access sexualised content on there, I was quite naive to what was available. That is as a nearly 40-year-old man. You can imagine that a child or young person stumbling across or being directed towards



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that very sexualised content is totally unacceptable. We know these platforms need to do far more.

That is an interesting point about the levy, which you have raised with me before. I know the Government consulted extensively throughout the development of the online safety proposals and they did explore that. As part of the internet safety strategy Green Paper, there was a consultation on a social media levy. I think there were very mixed responses to that, but we can look into that and perhaps write to the Committee.

It is DCMS led, so we can find out about that. I think the decision was that the best way to protect users, in particular children, was to take forward the Online Safety Bill and then a regulator via Ofcom, with strong and robust financial penalties for breaches. I will happily take that away and explore it further with the DCMS Secretary of State.

Q1172 Chair: They would have to behave much more responsibly. It would also raise money to help with mental health and resilience. Given what they are doing, given the statistics that you know and I have cited, companies such as TikTok and other social media companies have a serious responsibility for what they are doing to our young people. I think it would concentrate the minds of these social media companies if they knew that there would be a levy to help deal with all the problems they are causing for children's wellbeing.

Will Quince: As I say, I will certainly take it away and explore it. It would not be us; it would be a DCMS lead. But I can certainly feed that in from a children and young persons' advocate perspective. My gut instinct is that as attractive as it might sound on the surface, there is a danger that when you put a levy on a company or organisation like that, they say, "We've paid our levy. We've taken our responsibilities. It's done."

Q1173 Chair: You can do both. It's not either/or; it is both.

Will Quince: In theory, it is not binary. If I could do one thing, it would be getting them to invest and properly take the measures and put in the processes and procedures needed to make it very difficult for children and young people to access harmful content. That would be the ideal outcome, but as I say, I will take it away and find out why DCMS did not take up that option further and discuss it with the Secretary of State.

Q1174 Chair: I have a couple of final questions. We know that the number of children being referred for mental health rose by 60% during 2019-20. There are 100,000 more children being treated for mental health than three years ago. The Children's Commissioner has said that despite the increase in referrals, the number of children accessing treatment increased by just 4%. What are you doing to deal with this issue, which has been made worse by covid? Surely every child should be assessed for their mental health in schools. Why not rocket-boost the Government's programme to put mental health counsellors in schools and develop resilience programmes such as that I have seen at Newham Collegiate Sixth Form Centre, which I went to a couple of weeks ago? What is the Government doing to deal with this problem, which is getting worse?



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Will Quince: First, I would agree with you that it is one of the biggest challenges we face. The problem has been made much worse by the pandemic, and we know that children and young people's mental health has suffered over that period.

I will address each point in turn. The first is that I entirely agree with you that we need an approach that is based on resilience, prevention and support. You specifically touched on the support side, which is mostly when, sadly, children and young people are in crisis and they are referred to CAMHS and need to get a specialist DHSC report. I know that an extra £2.3 billion has been put in as part of the long-term plan for the NHS, specifically to tackle some of those issues. I am meeting Minister Keegan to discuss this, among other issues, later today. Mental health is absolutely a priority for me, because I know, looking at the big ask in the Children's Commissioner's survey and others, that this is a massive issue for children and young people.

In terms of what we are doing specifically, you rightly alluded to the mental health support teams. It is more than an ambition, we will deliver them to 35% of schools by 2023. Would I love to accelerate that and make it further and faster? Of course I would. There are three challenges. One is funding, so we would need to secure that. I think we already have £17 million, and there is an additional £79 million to get to the 35%. There is also the DHSC capacity. The third challenge is that it takes three years to train up a mental health support team. I am keen to get this rolled out further. As I say, I am meeting the Minister—

Q1175 **Chair:** Should children be assessed?

Will Quince: We have the mental health team leads in schools training programme, which is £1,200 per pupil. I think the take-up of that scheme has been very good. All schools do this ever so slightly differently, but we are building up the resilience through the RHSE curriculum and we are talking about mental health wellbeing. I am keen to do far more in the sports and extra-curricular space. The key to mental health—this is where we come back to the very first question—is mental wellbeing and keeping kids in schools, which is the best place for children and young people.

Q1176 **Chair:** If you have a revolving door of schools closing and opening, it is a shock to the child. One week, they are in school, and one week, they are out.

Will Quince: The final thing I will say is that the £1 billion of covid recovery funding is un-ringfenced. Schools can spend that on additional mental health support, and I know some are spending it on things such as counselling as part of wider pastoral support throughout the school to identify needs. Some are funding that either through the covid recovery fund or through their core grant or high-needs budget.

Q1177 **Chair:** It would be very helpful if you or the Secretary of State or the relevant Ministers set out the direction of travel for children with special educational needs, children who are being excluded and children with mental health difficulties, if not in a speech, then in a statement to the



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House of Commons, because these are the most vulnerable children and I think they are being left behind. To me, levelling up should be all about this—not exclusively, but a substantial part of it—to give these children a level playing field. I think these children are being left behind, so I hope very much that that happens, whether it's you doing it or you passing the baton up the food chain, so to speak. I think that would be very welcome.

When is the publication date of the children's social care review?

Will Quince: I don't think a date has been set yet, but I believe the ambition of Josh MacAlister is the first quarter of next year.

Q1178 **Chair:** The first quarter of next year. So a lot going on.

Will Quince: There is a lot going on, hence why we are working at pace to get this. I am determined, Chairman, that you will not have me before you at the summer of next year saying, "Why haven't you delivered these things?", because we are determined to deliver.

Q1179 **Ian Mearns:** Minister, as we have gone through the morning, I think you have referred to a number of things—in fact, quite a number of things—as being a priority. When you have a priority, it is uppermost. Of all the things you have talked about, which is uppermost, and would you set yourself a key performance indicator for whether you have successfully challenged that uppermost priority?

Will Quince: That is a very good question but a very difficult one to answer, because obviously the two, if you like, big-ticket items here are the children's social care review and the SEND review. They are the two where we have set dates, and we have absolutely got to deliver on those, but I am also conscious that there are huge pressures on mental health. But I have been moved here for a reason. We have got a lot to get on with, there is a huge amount of delivery and I give you my absolute assurance that the next time I am sitting before you, which will no doubt be in the new year, we will have made significant progress. For me, this is all about turning the dial on the life chances of children and young people in our country. Watch this space; we're going to make it happen.

Chair: Can I thank you very much for over one and a half hours of sustained questioning? I am very glad you are in your post, but we have to ask these questions and scrutinise. I wish you good luck, and once you have got some of these reviews published, I hope sooner rather than later, we will have you back. We are very grateful to you, and to you, Indra, for your time and all that you are trying to do, especially in this very difficult time.