

Education Committee

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

Wednesday 29 April 2020, by audio visual conferencing

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 29 April 2020.

[Watch the meeting](#)

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

Questions 67 - 135

Witness

[I](#): Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE, Secretary of State for Education.

Written evidence from witness:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witness

Witness: Gavin Williamson.

Q67 Chair: I am very pleased to welcome the Secretary of State to our online Committee session this morning, a very important session. Thank you for coming. It is good to see you in good health. Can I start by wishing every good health and safety to all the incredible teachers and educational staff who are still working and looking after vulnerable children and children of critical key workers, particularly support staff who are doing a remarkable job alongside the teachers?

If I can start the questioning today, Secretary of State, would you not agree that the coronavirus has thrown up three very serious issues: a potential wave of educational poverty, significant safeguarding worries for children, and a digital divide? We know that vulnerable children are not attending school. Your figures from the DfE suggest that just 5% of vulnerable learners are attending an educational setting. We know that 2% of teachers in our most disadvantaged schools believe that all pupils have access to adequate devices for online learning, and 55% of teachers from the most disadvantaged schools think that the average pupil in their class is learning for less than one hour a day. This is a potential cascade of mounting social injustice that could last a generation. Do you agree that unless serious action and thinking are taken by the Government, there will be that wave of educational poverty that could potentially come crashing down on thousands of children across our country?

Gavin Williamson: Thank you, Mr Chairman, and thank you for inviting me along to join you today. Can I start off by echoing your words of thanks and appreciation to all of those who are working in schools, whether that is teachers, those who are supporting, teaching assistants, those who are working to make sure that schools can open, and those who are working in nurseries and FE colleges, and the amazing work that is going on in our universities as well, who are absolutely central to our battle against coronavirus in terms of developing a vaccine?

Touching upon some of the points that you were making, it is also vital that we highlight the work that social workers are doing and the amazing input that they are having in terms of reaching out to some of those children that you have highlighted. You have made a very important point about the concerns that I know that you feel and I am sure that many people on the Committee feel, but also something that is shared by myself and the whole Department, about the concern of children falling behind. It is all children we are concerned about falling behind, but there are particular concerns about those children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and how we can do everything we can to help them.

We have to be honest with people that taking children out of school for a period of time is not what any of us would want to see and it does mean that they miss out on a lot of schooling. What we need to do is look at different ways that we can help and support those children to ensure that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we do not see them falling behind further and we have the opportunity for them to be able to gain on that learning.

You highlight a particular area in terms of a digital divide, and this was a concern that I had in terms of how children, especially from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, were going to be able to access a lot of learning and a lot of brilliant learning that we have on the internet. This is why we embarked on the programme of providing over £100 million-worth of digital resources, 200,000 laptops for those children from the most challenging backgrounds.

Q68 Chair: I strongly welcome that initiative and we will come on to that later. Does the Department know how long pupils are spending learning each day and the extent to which that is affected by their socioeconomic position?

Gavin Williamson: We do not at the moment have that data. One of your earlier points was about the number of children who were attending school, especially those children classed as a vulnerable category. We were the first country that gave the opportunity for vulnerable children to be able to continue to attend school through this crisis, but we have been concerned about the numbers of those children actually attending school. Over the Easter period, both social services and schools themselves made an enormous effort to reach out to those vulnerable children, to encourage them to come into school. We have seen a doubling in the number of children from that vulnerable category who have been attending school.

Q69 Chair: Has the Department started to calculate the likely effect that school closures will have on the attainment gap?

Gavin Williamson: We have been working with the Education Endowment Foundation, which is obviously something that we set up a number of years ago in order to give absolutely evidence-based information as to where the challenges are in education and how we develop the best policies in order to deal with that. We are working with the Education Endowment Foundation and the Sutton Trust, as well as doing our own internal work in terms of how we put in resources that are best able to help children to be able to recover and make sure that they get all the resources they need in order to get the best education.

Q70 Chair: You mentioned the laptop scheme, which is a great scheme and I am sure that lots of parents and schools will be thanking you for that. Does the Department know how many disadvantaged learners are not eligible for the free laptop scheme, and what are your plans for those particular individuals to make sure that they have access to some kind of online learning?

Gavin Williamson: The reason that we established the laptop scheme was that we are conscious that there are certain people at critical moments of their education where they are going to be facing challenges in terms of exams in the near future. We needed to support them and put



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that resource in place. As a first priority, we wanted to get that resource to them.

Obviously, we are looking very closely at how this is going to work. If it works well and if the resources used are making a big impact in terms of those children's learning, we would like to look at whether it is something that could be expanded and whether it is worth expanding. This is a pretty substantial trial with an investment of £100 million, but we wanted to make sure that this has the real impact that we are expecting and hoping it does.

- Q71 **Chair:** In terms of vulnerable children, there are some charities and organisations like the Safeguarding Alliance who say that there are new vulnerabilities that are being found. There is a new frontier of vulnerabilities affecting children: children's mental health, children who have access to potential serious online harms. Are you assessing those kinds of different vulnerabilities that may emerge, even though they may not be classed under the existing list of vulnerable children?

Gavin Williamson: We absolutely are and this is something that we have been working very closely with the Home Office and the Home Secretary on, looking at a whole range of different harms and vulnerabilities that children may be exposed to. We have, sadly, always seen in times of crisis that sometimes predatory behaviours emerge and people using the crisis in order to be able to exploit children. This is why the work that we have been doing with the Home Office is so vital, and I would like to pay tribute to the Home Secretary, who has driven this incredibly hard in terms of all the work that she has been doing in the Home Office, working with social services but also with schools. We have a very high level of collaboration about how we are trying to tackle some of these increasing dangers that we may—

- Q72 **Chair:** Just to go back to what I was saying, does the DfE have a clear picture about exactly what is happening to vulnerable children who are not attending school? Are you satisfied that for those children who are not attending, there are adequate measures in place to ensure their safety?

Gavin Williamson: This is why you have seen a lot of work through social services but also working closely with schools, making sure that there is regular contact with those children. Just because they are not in school does not mean to say that the work that social services are doing is not incredibly far-ranging, making sure that they are constantly working with those children, working with those families, making sure that they have the support that is needed.

We recognise that the pressures in this area have grown. This is why we took the measures to increase the number and pool of people who could come back into social services work. We extended that pool by 8,000. I am pleased to report to the Committee that over 1,000 social workers



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have come back into the service in order to help us at this quite extraordinary time.

- Q73 **Chair:** We talked about the digital divide. Most homes, 95%, have a TV station. Have you had any thoughts about perhaps working with the BBC or other broadcasting services to provide a long-term national education service on television that would broadcast for a few hours a day, where people could access through a red button the year they were in? Those children who do not have access to computers would at least be able to get an education at home if they are not attending school.

Gavin Williamson: This is something that we have been working very closely with the BBC on. I have had a number of meetings with the Director-General of the BBC, Lord Hall, in order to discuss this exact issue. Can I take the opportunity to thank the BBC for launching the largest ever education programme that they have had in the corporation's history? Recognising the point that people do not always have a laptop or some form of tablet in their home and recognising that TV is a great way of doing that, we have been working closely with the BBC. It has an extensive programme. We are always very keen to see how we could make that a more extensive programme, recognising the fact that most people have a TV in their house where they are not necessarily going to have a computer.

If we are in a position where we could do more with the BBC and the BBC is able to make more available, we are incredibly keen to do that with them. We have been providing them with guidance as to how best to do that and also making people available who are best able to guide them and put the best resource on TV for children.

- Q74 **Chair:** As we move, hopefully, towards the aftermath of this awful disease, we have talked about the—*[Inaudible]* according to the Sutton Trust. Do you support the idea that I floated and—*[Inaudible]* provide extra tuition and extra mentoring for these disadvantaged or vulnerable pupils who may not have attended school one way or the other and may be way behind? Perhaps that catch-up could even be supported by a nationwide network of volunteers, graduates, retired teachers, perhaps Ofsted inspectors. A lot of them are former teachers who may be able to join a volunteer scheme in the way that the Government have done with the NHS volunteer scheme, helping existing schools supporting vulnerable children, both at present and in the aftermath of this disease.

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, I do apologise, you froze at a number of points during that question, but I think I got the gist and thrust of it. If I do not touch on any particular point, you could maybe come back on that.

I would like to think that we are actually a bit ahead of you. You have talked about the catch-up premium. We recognise that we need to put in a whole set of different measures to help all children, and this is why we have launched the Oak National Academy. This is why we have started to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

put more resources online. This is why we are working very closely with schools to start looking at how we can plan resources best in the future to make sure that children, from whatever background they come from, are helped.

There is a particular issue with some children who are most disadvantaged. The reason I say that I would like to think that we are getting a bit ahead of what you are suggesting is the fact that we are already making that £100 million investment in IT equipment to reach out to some of those most disadvantaged children. We are also very closely working with the Education Endowment Foundation on the concept of pilots for how best we can do targeted support for some of those most disadvantaged children. We have set up a whole stream of work about how, in terms of recovery from this, we can pick up some of those children who are most disadvantaged, how we can put in place those interventions that will ensure that they do not suffer any form of educational disadvantage, and how we can help them. I want what we do on that to be very targeted support that makes a big impact in terms of those children who need that help.

Q75 Chair: Are you considering a nationwide volunteer scheme of former teachers, perhaps some Ofsted inspectors and graduates, to help schools mentor and provide tuition for left-behind pupils?

Gavin Williamson: We are discussing it and we are doing quite a considerable amount of work on a whole different range of aspects of policies. Those policies are not yet ready to be launched. When they are, obviously we will be sharing that with the Committee. We are looking at different ways of how we can use the enormous volunteer army of people who have come forward, many with past educational experience, many with an awful lot of knowledge in specialist subjects. We have been working incredibly closely with Ofsted, which has been incredibly important in terms of supplementing and working with the Department in order to support many different aspects of education.

We are very open to these ideas, but we have a whole train of different pieces of work as to how we can support pupils. At the moment of coming to this Committee, I am afraid I am not in a position to be able to announce what those policies are going to be, apart from obviously what we have already announced in terms of the digital £100 million investment that we have made.

Q76 Chair: Do you have a date for when the schools will open?

Gavin Williamson: We are working very closely with the whole sector around when is going to be the best time to bring schools fully back into operation. We have set out five clear tests as to what is incredibly important and what will inform the opening of the schools. We want to make sure that schools are given proper notice, but we do not have a date as to when schools are going to be opening up.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q77 **Chair:** Do you imagine that when they do open it will be in stages and would you favour primary opening first or secondary schools opening first?

Gavin Williamson: This is obviously something that we are giving a great amount of thought and consideration to. Just a couple of weeks ago, I commissioned SAGE to set up a subgroup to look at the particular issues of opening schools, making sure that when schools are opened it is done in the best possible way with the very best scientific and medical advice. We expect SAGE to report back and the information that we get from SAGE, along with Public Health England, will be the key parts of what informs us as to how best we open schools. I do expect schools to be opened in a phased manner. I also intend to be giving schools as much notice as is possible in order to ensure—

Q78 **Chair:** Should they open in the summer holidays to help left-behind—
[Inaudible]

Ian Mearns: We seem to have lost the Chairman. Are you back, Robert? You froze there, I am afraid.

Chair: I am here, yes. Should we—*[Inaudible]* and for left-behind pupils?

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, I think you are asking whether we are planning to open schools during the summer, and we are not planning to run schools through the summer. But as I was talking about earlier, what we are doing is looking at a whole set of interventions to help children catch up in terms of their work across the whole broad setting of children of all backgrounds, but also looking at different interventions that we can make in order to be able to help children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Q79 **Chair:** This is my final question before I pass on to my colleagues. We know that support staff are often the unsung heroes of the lockdown and without them none of the schools would be able to remain open. The Government's guidance says that PPE is not needed in most cases, yet acknowledges that social distancing is harder to maintain in education settings. How are the Government reconciling these two positions and are they contradictory? What is the scientific basis for saying that most teachers or support staff do not need PPE?

Gavin Williamson: As you can imagine, we turn to Public Health England to give us the very best advice in terms of protecting both the workforce and children. We have constantly asked them for guidance as to how best to deal with both school settings—primary and secondary schools—but also special schools, and at every stage, as we reopen schools in a phased manner. The reason that we commissioned the SAGE subgroup to look at this is to make sure they are giving us the best scientific advice and then, as we are opening schools in a phased manner, we will make sure that we are consulting with Public Health England to ensure that we are getting the very best advice in terms of protecting children and protecting staff.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring in very quickly Tom, Ian, Jonathan and Fleur, and then pass over to David Simmonds, because they have questions.

- Q80 **Tom Hunt:** Good morning, Secretary of State. The Sutton Trust findings do concern me in terms of the percentage of children who are every day logging into these online lessons. I think about 17% is the level for some of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. I have spoken to a couple of headteachers who have had very high levels of participation every day. One of the things that they do is have a live roll call every morning, and they make it so that the children have to register for every class. If they do not, then they call the parents. It seems to be working quite well there. I just wanted to know what the Department for Education guidance is to schools regarding registration and roll calls at the start of a day and whether you think that could lead to higher attendance at the moment during Covid.

Gavin Williamson: Tom, I think that is a very valid point and it is what we have been trying to do in terms of putting out more and more guidance to schools to give them a greater sense of what is working. We have been working with a lot of schools right across the country. The reason we created the Oak National Academy was to give a very structured form of learning that anyone would be able to access.

We are very keen for schools to do everything they can to be engaging with their pupils, giving them a sense that education can continue in a different way as to how it would be in school but giving children as much structure as possible. There are some brilliant examples, but how we get those brilliant examples and scale that up across the country is something that we have been attempting to do by sharing more guidance and a greater sense of what is working and how it can work in helping schools to deliver that.

- Q81 **Jonathan Gullis:** Thank you very much, Secretary of State, and I wish you and your family all the best during this crisis. Coming back to the Chair's point regarding kids going back over the summer holidays, my great fear—and I am sure that of yourself—is that year 11 and year 13 especially missed out on crucial learning of what it is like to sit an exam and obviously be rewarded for what they have done. They will have been away from school for such a prolonged period of time, especially the year 13s. Obviously, we normally have the National Citizen Service that runs through the summer break. Is there any way that we can ensure that especially year 11 and year 13 students can do some voluntary work within the community to ensure that they are engaged and motivated while they do not have the academic pressure of an exam sitting over them?

Gavin Williamson: Can I just start off by paying tribute to the amazing work that you have been doing with your schools in Stoke-on-Trent North and obviously bringing your talents as a teacher very much to use to support your constituents?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

A lot of this depends on the scientific and medical advice that we get as to what we can lay on to best support those children. I think there is a real challenge in a number of transition years, and you highlight those who are in year 11 and those who are in year 13. We have particular concerns about children in those years who may not wish to exploit some of the further educational opportunities that may be available to them, either through further education colleges or universities. We are looking at how we can do reach-out work to them to make sure that they are aware of those opportunities.

In terms of the idea of volunteering schemes, this is something that we would very much like to see, but we are a little bit dependent on the scientific and medical advice as to what can be laid on and what can be done. I know this is something that the National Citizen Service has been looking at very closely as to how it can be done. In the Department, we have been doing work to see if there are activities that we can be putting on through the summer for youngsters. It was looking slightly more broadly, not just at those particular two year groups, not just in terms of helping them in education but pushing the reconnection with young people again after they have had this long period of social isolation.

Q82 Fleur Anderson: Good morning, Secretary of State. I just want to ask a couple more questions about the laptops. In my area, we are scrabbling around getting voluntary contributions of laptops, and some charities are helping, but we do not know when the rollout of the laptop scheme is happening. Could I ask you again about the likely timeframe of the rollout of the laptops and the accompanying data, which is proving even more important for many families? Is that just for England or is it Scotland and Wales as well?

Gavin Williamson: First, it is just for England in terms of where we are doing the laptop scheme, as these matters are devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In terms of a timeframe, this week we will be writing to all local authorities and multi-academy trusts to give them a clearer indication as to what allocations they will be receiving in this rollout of digital equipment. We expect the first laptops to be arriving at the end of May, with the majority delivered through June.

We do not see this rollout of digital equipment to be something that is just to deal with the challenge that we are facing today. We see this as part of addressing the longer-term problem of helping children get what they need in their learning as rapidly as possible over the summer period and going into the next academic year as well.

Q83 Ian Mearns: Good morning, Secretary of State. Regarding the potential for phased reopening or reopening of schools, many of our schools, of course, are still open here in Gateshead. I know of schools that are still doing what they are meant to be doing, and that is looking after the youngsters of key workers and youngsters with vulnerabilities and



disadvantage. The numbers are very low, I think the sort of numbers that we have heard talked about: 1% before Easter and, in schools that I am aware of, about 3% or 4% of pupils actually physically coming in. Social distancing is absolutely possible in that circumstance, but even on a phased return, we would have to think about youngsters—probably more than 25% of the roll—not being in school at once in order to have any chance of keeping the social distancing rules in operation. Otherwise, what we do know about the potential for asymptomatic transmission of Covid-19 could still be a significant danger. The guidance for what is required in schools regarding PPE and social distancing really does need to be updated because the guidance that we have seen for the care settings has been constantly updated and moved on quite a lot since this whole business started. We do need to think about that very carefully, Secretary of State.

Gavin Williamson: Ian, I think you raise an important point. When we enter the next phase of dealing with this crisis and as we look at having a phased return of schools, we will have to constantly look at how we update the advice and give teachers and those who work in schools, as well as nurseries and colleges, the very best advice for making sure that they create a safe space. It is incredibly important that we get the right balance in making sure that we create an environment that is good to learn in but also that is a safe environment for people to both work in and learn in as well.

Chair: Thank you. David has been waiting very patiently.

Q84 **David Simmonds:** Good morning, Secretary of State. I very much echo your comments about how the sector has stepped up to support children.

I have two questions about reopening and PPE. I have been speaking to a lot of headteachers in the constituency about what their plans are and, in particular, multi-academy trusts and local authorities looking at what they can do over the summer for catch-up. They have flagged two issues. The first is around the risk assessment for vulnerable children. SEND schools in particular have said they already have supplies of personal protective equipment for any child where they would routinely expect and need it, but some of those children have particular medical vulnerabilities. They really want on the Department's radar the need to do effective risk assessments and that that forms part of any reopening plans. Could I have your view about that and the risk assessment process?

The second issue more generally is about opening. A number of those schools, local authorities and multi-academy trusts have said they are already planning to open up for as much of the summer as they can on their own initiative. They would like to have that engagement with the Department so that, in the context of the national plan for reopening, the Department is aware and can factor in the plans that schools may themselves already be making to ensure that they can provide catch-up and support for children, especially the ones that they regard as



vulnerable.

Gavin Williamson: David, if we can pick up on special schools, we have had to look very closely at guidance that we have been issuing with them. We have worked very closely with Public Health England but also the whole sector to make sure that, because of the unique nature of the support that they are providing, we are giving them the best guidance possible.

In terms of return for these settings, the knowledge is contained in these schools of their pupils and their very specific needs. No one else has a better understanding of what that is, and we are looking very closely at how we can support those schools in terms of any return. As you know, many of these schools have continued to operate, and we have been looking at different ways that we can support them to make sure that they continue to support the most vulnerable children in our society. We will continue to double up those efforts when there is a more general return, but we recognise that it is going to be very specific advice that is needed for those settings, tailored for those settings. It is going to be quite separate from the general return for all other schools.

In terms of work that has been done, the Department has engaged in a whole stream of works about how we look at helping those children catch up on work that we recognise they will probably have missed out on. We have already had a lot of engagement with multi-academy trusts and schools as to how best we can assist and support them in doing that. That will be through a whole range of different activities, a little bit like some of the ones that you have yourself highlighted, but we are hoping to bring forward some of that thinking over the next few weeks and share that with schools and work in conjunction with them. Most of the thinking that we have done is borrowing from the knowledge and the expertise of the school sector, who know better than anyone else as to how best to support their pupils in making sure that they are not disadvantaged from the weeks that they have missed in school.

Q85 **David Johnston:** Thank you, Secretary of State. Can you say anything about the measures that you expect the Department to use to make sure the disadvantage gap is not growing between the poorest children and the rest as a result of this lockdown?

Gavin Williamson: We have already highlighted the fact that we are rolling out a digital programme. We are going to be coming up with a whole set of other actions to be particularly targeted, a little bit like the Chairman himself was highlighting—the fact that there will need to be quite specific targeted actions at some of those disadvantaged children. This is very much what we are looking at doing, developing a whole set of policies that are going to be helping and supporting those children to ensure that they do not fall behind in their studies.

We must not forget that every child is going to have suffered as a result of not going to school, and we do need to have a whole set of actions



that support the whole school population. There is going to need to be a very targeted approach to some of those from the most disadvantaged communities in how we help them and how we give them that lift. As I say, the digital package, which is a £100 million package, was the first stage of that, but it is the first stage and certainly not the last stage. I am not in a position to be able to outline the policies that we are going to be doing, but we are very aware of what needs to be done.

Q86 David Johnston: Thank you for that. I suppose I was thinking about what your indicators will be in looking at the performance of children to make sure that this is not having an undue impact. I appreciate that there will be more measures that you take, but what indicators are you going to look at?

Gavin Williamson: David, you raise an important point, in fact, that the assessment programmes that we have put into schools over the last 10 years are an incredibly important part of making sure that children's attainment is continuously monitored. We are constantly looking at whether a child is falling behind their year group and making sure that action is undertaken. We are looking at a whole different range of reading ages to see if children have been falling behind in their reading age as a result of not being in the school environment. We will be having to look at a whole set of different baseline assessments to make sure that we have a clear understanding of what children need.

I think the teaching profession is acutely aware and they, of course, hold so much of the expertise in terms of making sure that that assessment of children is made on their return to school and what action is undertaken, but we will be looking at supporting schools with guidance and advice as to how best to make those assessments and work with them to make sure the interventions are put in place so that they do not fall behind.

Q87 David Johnston: Just as a final point on this, can I encourage the Department, if it is not already planning to, to pay particular attention to the destinations data for these cohorts that will be leaving, to make sure that we are not seeing a radically different set of destinations for these guys than we would usually see?

Gavin Williamson: David, that is such an important point and it is something that I have been particularly concerned about. The Department for Education has some of the most developed data looking at young people's trajectories and where they go in life through the different stages of both education and the work of any Government Department.

I am particularly concerned about children from those vulnerable groups, because they have been outside of school or outside of college, that maybe they have not been pushed to seize some of the opportunities that are open to them and that could be truly transformational in their life. We are doing a whole quantity of work about how we reach out to those children and make sure that they understand that these are great



HOUSE OF COMMONS

opportunities for them, whether that is through further education college, doing different levels of qualification, or whether that is taking the opportunity to go to university, going to the very best university that we can encourage them to do.

Q88 Chair: Just before I bring in Ian on the free school meals issues, Caroline Johnson, are you there? She had a question. I am just going to read out her question, Secretary of State. She would like to ask about guidance to schools on provisions for the curriculum. What guidance is there for children with no broadband access? She is suggesting that some children are not on broadband due to geography rather than finance, and these children would not routinely be disadvantaged but now are. How are these children being picked up?

Gavin Williamson: Caroline raises an important point because there are parts of the country that do suffer from very poor broadband connection. This is why our shared passion, Mr Chairman, to involve the BBC and support the BBC in the work that it has been doing to provide educational resource through the television is so useful and so important. We have also issued whole sets of guidance and resources for schools that if children are suffering from no proper access to broadband, we would be encouraging them to share with children, and post out to them if they are not able to access broadband, to be able to access educational resources.

We have also, as part of our digital package, recognised a number of people do not have access to 4G. That was why part of the package, quite a substantial part of the package, was about distribution of 4G access for families so they are able to access internet if they have not previously been able to do so.

Chair: Caroline, I think you can hear now, is that right?

Q89 Dr Caroline Johnson: Yes. *[Inaudible.]* My constituency is particularly affected, I think, as a rural constituency by the lack of broadband. One of the things that concerned me at our meeting earlier in the week with Ofsted was that there was to be no review at all of the provisions that schools have been providing during this period. *[Inaudible.]* What guidance is your Department giving to schools to support those children who live in rural geographies and do not have access to broadband? I understand that you have the BBC, but if somebody has—*[Inaudible]* BBC programmes may not be possible. Many families do not have the opportunity to look at more than one channel at the same time in the house. Can you hear me?

Gavin Williamson: Caroline, I have heard elements of it. I think you are demonstrating some of the challenges of poor internet access very well.

There are challenges. There are geographical challenges. We have been trying to build up quite a substantial resource base for the schools to access in terms of guidance. Obviously, the internet is the easiest, most cost-effective and also the most simple way of sharing things most widely. We do recognise that some schools will have technological



challenges in being able to do that. Most areas of the country do have good 4G connection if they do not necessarily always have the best internet connection. That is why we have done the 4G package that we brought forward. It is really about trying to give schools guidance and advice on how they can use resources to send out to children, but we are not in a position where Ofsted is doing inspections of schools to check as to what they are doing. We are trying to put as much resource there to be available to schools to give them the best chance of being able to support all communities wherever they are, whether they are town, city or rural.

Chair: Tom, did you have a question?

Q90 **Tom Hunt:** Just on the disadvantaged, I am really concerned about those with dyslexia and dyspraxia. I know that the Oak National Academy does have support for those with autism and quite severe forms of SEND, but a number of teachers have expressed concerns to me that it is not dyslexia friendly, or for those with dyspraxia even. As somebody who has dyslexia and dyspraxia myself, I know that IT, things that are online, is not easy for us. We struggle with the processes and it can be really difficult. Often for those who have dyslexia and dyspraxia, they have very special relationships with certain teachers who they work with on a daily basis and those relationships are what get them through the challenges and help them progress. When considering the impact this is having on those who have special educational needs, I would urge the Government to do everything they can to support those with dyslexia and dyspraxia as well as those with more severe forms of SEND as well.

Gavin Williamson: Tom, as someone who knows some of the challenges that dyslexia brings in learning for young people, I know that this is incredibly important and something that a lot of parents worry about. We have tried, across the whole spectrum of needs that children have, to make a broad range of advice and resources available to them, but I do recognise that there is probably a hunger for ever more support.

As you can imagine, the Oak National Academy is a resource that has been borne out of a crisis, which has been pulled together at amazing speed by some amazing and wonderful people who have put so much personal effort into making it happen. We will certainly be looking at what more we can do to help and assist those children and those families who are trying to support their children with dyslexia or dyspraxia.

I must confess that the best way of supporting them is making sure that they are back into a good, safe school setting at the earliest opportunity, and that is why I am genuinely so passionate to see schools return when it is the right time to do so because I know that there are so many children—and I think the whole Committee has touched on it—from every single background, and every single one of them benefits from being in school and has the best opportunity and is in the best position to be able to learn when they are in school. That is why I am so keen to see schools return when it is that right time and when we can make that happen.



Chair: Apsana, did you have a quick question?

Q91 **Apsana Begum:** Yes, thank you. Thank you, Secretary of State. I just have a quick question about the emerging evidence that some adults from BAME—black and minority ethnic—backgrounds may be disproportionately affected by Covid-19. What plans are there in place to work with other Departments to consider what this means in particular for black and ethnic minority staff alongside other categories of vulnerable workers who are delivering teaching at the moment?

Gavin Williamson: Apsana, the decision to return schools in a phased manner will be a decision that is made right across Government in the best interests of the pupils and the teachers, making sure that this is done in a co-ordinated manner and working with all Government Departments to ensure that all considerations are properly taken on board.

The issue that you raise is something that is a really important consideration for the SAGE subgroup that we have asked to look at the issues of schools returning and making sure that it is done in the best possible and right way to protect the interests of pupils and of those who are working in schools, whether they be teachers or support staff. This is a key consideration in making sure that we get that right. We will always be guided by both the scientific and the medical advice to make sure that we make the right decisions.

Q92 **Chair:** You just said that the decision to open schools in a phased manner will be decided by the scientific advice. Does that mean that when it does happen they will be opened in a phased way?

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, when we bring schools back—I think everyone wants to see schools returning—they will be returned in a phased manner. We recognise that the idea of schools all returning on day one with a full complement of pupils is not practical.

Q93 **Chair:** Okay, but you have not decided the way that phasing is going to work yet, whether it is primary or secondary or early years?

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, we are working with the sector and with schools to make sure that when we do this, this is a logical and sensible route to doing it. We are looking at many countries across the globe that are a number of weeks ahead of us, whether it is nations such as Germany or Denmark, and looking at what works for them and how we can learn from that best practice. Of course, every nation has a slightly different schooling system, so the lessons that they have learned do not always translate, but it is important to look at what—

Chair: Thank you. I will do a quick question from Christian and then, Ian, I promise I will bring you in for this other stuff. Thank you for being patient.

Q94 **Christian Wakeford:** Thank you, Secretary of State, for joining us today. Similar to the question that Tom asked earlier, last week I met



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Bury2gether, which is a group of parents with SEND children. I am just wondering what engagement the Department is making with parent carer forums during the lockdown to make sure that the right information is getting to parents as to how they can educate their children during the lockdown in the absence of being able to engage fully with the Oak National Academy.

On a similar point, while the Oak National Academy is obviously a great resource, unfortunately there is still no real resource to help parents with early years children, myself included. While it is very nice to have a toddler at home, it is very difficult to know what best to do to help educate them. If we get early years wrong, that potentially sets a child's educational career up for the absolute wrong trajectory. What is the Department doing for early years in lockdown to make sure that our youngest children are benefiting the most?

Gavin Williamson: Obviously, some of the key priorities have been children in years 10 and 12, as the Committee will appreciate. We have recognised that those are the children who are going to be facing exams at the earliest stage so, quite understandably, a lot of focus has been put into supporting them.

Oak National Academy has been touching across every single year group. One of the best resources in terms of access again has been the BBC in touching some of those early years, but we do recognise that there is always a demand for more. I take on board your point that you would like to see more in early years. I will try to make sure that we have a specially targeted package for you, Christian, to be able to educate your children.

We are constantly working with the sector to develop the offer that we have. As you have probably seen from the gov.uk website, we have put up an enormous amount of resource, whether it is for children who have special educational needs or children of all age groups. It is not just about the Oak National Academy; there is a whole set of players, businesses, organisations, that have made their resources free. We have tried to use the gov.uk website as the opportunity to signpost, whether it is parents or teachers, to these resources of every single age group but also of every single ability range, making sure that we have the very highest quality resources.

Chair: Thank you. Ian has been waiting for a long time, so thank you so much. There were so many questions on that from Members.

Q95 **Ian Mearns:** I want to return to the issue of what we are doing to ensure that disadvantaged youngsters are being catered for in this period. Of course, one of the things that has been done is the development of a voucher system to make sure that youngsters have access to enough food for when they should have been at school and would have had a free school meal. It has to be said, Secretary of State, I could probably talk to you for the next 45 minutes, which I will not be



allowed to, about the failings of the Edenred system and the inordinate amount of time it is taking school staff, in particular headteachers out of hours, to access the system—hours and hours on end. I have been collecting horror stories about the Edenred system from headteachers on how inaccessible the whole system is to them. The fact is that it is taking hours and hours, and the headteachers have learned that Edenred itself has stated that the number of youngsters it was expecting to cater for was originally 100% understated by the DfE and, therefore, it was not actually geared up for the numbers that it eventually then had to deal with. I have had headteachers describe to me that if they had to put on a bar graph their interaction with the Edenred system, it would go something from the low end, deep frustration, to the high end, please kill me now, because it is taking so long to interact with this system.

Secretary of State, what can be done because, as a result of this, many youngsters who should be getting this support are still struggling to get that support? We have also had a situation where free school meal services provided by the local authority have jumped back into the void and provide hundreds upon hundreds of meals for youngsters in a packed lunch format.

Gavin Williamson: Ian, right from the start, we are very keen for schools to be able to continue to provide school meals at a local level. Obviously, the funding for school meals that can be provided by schools has continued all the way through this period.

Additional to that, we wanted to be able to give schools the ability to offer additional resources because we recognise that all children who would be eligible for free school meals would not be able to necessarily access schools themselves in order to be able to have the benefit of the meal that we had already funded and provided through that school. Additional to that, we wanted to be able to put in resource. We did say to schools that we would give them the flexibility to be able to procure it locally up to the value of £15, and we increased the amount that we are willing to spend on that, but we did also say that, in terms of the Edenred system, we want to put something in place, which was the national voucher scheme—that if it was not able to be provided locally or there were not the systems in place, this is something that they could turn to.

I readily acknowledge that the level of demand for this has been exceptionally high, and we have had some big challenges in terms of being able to provide schools with the level of service that we would have wanted them to see, but we have been, from the Department's point of view and with Edenred, doing everything we can to support them in being able to get these vouchers out as rapidly as possible. In the first few weeks, we saw a slow turnaround in people getting the vouchers out. That has increased substantially. We still have some challenges in schools being able to access as rapidly, being able to place those orders, and we are doing a lot more work with Edenred to speed that up because we recognise how important that is.



Q96 Ian Mearns: Secretary of State, thank you for that. I hope that you have gleaned from my question the deep level of frustration that exists out there. Additionally, though, I understand there are a number of supermarket chains where people are able to redeem their vouchers, but not the Co-op. There are an awful lot of communities around the country where the Co-op might be the only store that is accessible locally. I have no axe to grind with the Co-op, but it has been raised with me directly as to why the Co-op is not involved in this scheme, given that in many communities it might be the only store that is of any use in terms of redeeming such a voucher. It is already willing to participate, should the DfE and the Edenred scheme be able to do that for it. Could we see some movement on that, please?

Gavin Williamson: Ian, we want to have a larger range of supermarkets participating in the scheme. As of today, McColl's is coming on to the scheme. We saw just a few days ago Aldi coming on to the scheme. We really want the Co-op to participate in this scheme. As you will well know, as I do, the Co-op is not one organisation. It is a multitude of different companies, of co-operatives that form it, but operating under one brand. If I think about where I live, there are two Co-op stores, both operated by two different co-operative societies. Some of the co-operative societies are in a position where they could accept vouchers, but a large number of co-operative societies are not yet in a position where they can accept the vouchers.

Then there is a danger that people are in confusion if they are going to a Co-op store that is branded exactly the same but they are not able to access it because that is a co-operative society that is not able to accept the vouchers. We are working with the co-operative movement to be in a position where it can accept the vouchers. I want nothing more than to do this. It was one of the supermarket organisations right at the start. We wanted to get it on board. I know that it wants to do so, and it is working hard with all of its members to be in a position to be able to accept those vouchers but avoiding the confusion for people who may potentially go into a Co-op that would not then be able to accept that voucher. We are trying to get there.

If there is anything that you or the Committee can do in terms of working with the co-operative movement to help it to get into that position—we are doing everything that we can to help, and we would hope that we are in a position where we can get them accepted.

Q97 Fleur Anderson: Jonathan is going to ask about the Wonde scheme, but I would just like to ask why Edenred was chosen when it did not—and still does not, from what you are saying—enable co-operation with Lidl or the Co-op, but it does with Waitrose and M&S. Given the group of people who we are working to provide the free school meals for, it does not seem to have been the right choice of company to have supported from the start. I would like to echo what Ian was saying about the Co-op, that it does want to work with the Department on this. It is ready and willing, but it



HOUSE OF COMMONS

cannot work with Edenred. It has gone as far as it can for that. There needs to be some flexibility and different ways of working, which I am sure can be done. It just needs to go outside the Edenred scheme, which many schools have had to do in order to get those free school meal vouchers early enough as well, because they have taken a long time to come.

Chair: If you could try to give a brief answer, Secretary of State. Thank you.

Gavin Williamson: On the reason that Edenred was chosen, as you would imagine, you would very much hope for me to always operate within the law, and in terms of making the commercial procurement decisions, Edenred was already an approved supplier that we are able to turn to at speed.

You raised a particular point. Schools do have flexibility. We wanted to build in the flexibility. If, for example, a school is serving a community where the only store is a co-operative, it has the ability and it will be fully reimbursed and fully refunded in order to be able to procure vouchers from that co-operative in order to distribute to that local community. We recognised immediately from the start that, with the speed with which we were creating the system, we could not create a perfect system, so we recognised we needed to give schools the flexibility to do that. That is why they have the flexibility, so if they need to work with the co-operative and want to work with the co-operative in that way, they can procure vouchers and do it in that manner.

Q98 **Jonathan Gullis:** Secretary of State, obviously I appreciate what you are saying with regards to Edenred being selected due to your constraints within the law, but we are in unprecedented times. I do applaud the DfE on trying to pull off what is hopefully a once-in-a-lifetime thing with this. Wonde already provides vouchers to 16,000 schools. Why would it be ignored when it offered its assistance with the delivery of this voucher scheme?

Gavin Williamson: If I can write to you, Jonathan, with the details of the decisions that we made about the procurement, we would be very happy to write to you directly with the details as to how we reached that decision and the speed at which we had to make that.

Jonathan Gullis: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Q99 **Chair:** I think the general point of the Committee is it is great and amazing that you have been able to set this up in record time, but one school after another is having huge difficulties getting access to it and queues online. It is a bit like trying to get a supermarket delivery, but obviously this is for vulnerable children. I think that is underlying the questions of the Committee.

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, effectively we had to create a whole new strand of support for families that had previously never been done by a Department at such speed and to such an extent. We recognise that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

there have been real challenges with the system, and we really do value the patience that people have shown. Please let me reassure the Committee that we are doing everything we can in terms of putting flexibility in the system for schools to work to local need, but also, equally importantly, to make sure this system works as best as possible for those schools and those parents who are accessing it.

Q100 **David Johnston:** Just one small question. Am I right, Secretary of State, that it is 200,000 laptops that you expect to supply? Is that what you said earlier?

Gavin Williamson: Yes.

Q101 **David Johnston:** In your guidance it says that the devices will go to “some” year 10 pupils. Does that include free school meal eligible pupils?

Gavin Williamson: We are going to be giving schools the opportunity to decide as to where the resource is best needed. Obviously, if a child already has access to IT equipment, there is not an awful lot of point in doubling up that resource. Free school meals are one of those factors, but we think that schools will be the best people to use sensible discretion because we want this resource to be widely used for children who have the greatest need. There are a lot of children who are on free school meals but will have access to laptops. We would not want to see doubling up.

Q102 **Chair:** Thank you. Just on the online learning, I know we have talked a lot about this, but given the importance of early years in setting up children to learn, do you have any plans to increase access to online learning for younger children at home?

Gavin Williamson: Not currently in a specific, Department-led, online portal. Not in the realm of where the Oak National Academy was, but currently, across a whole set of areas, we are rapidly developing different offers. If you had asked me four months ago whether we would have the Oak National Academy running, I would not have believed that that was possible. As to where we will be in a month’s time, I imagine we will be in a substantially different place than we are today.

Q103 **Chair:** I think there is significant recognition that some remarkable things have been done, but on the Oak National Academy, the laptops for older children, for the year 10s, there is just the concern—you do not need to answer this—that there are still a lot of people who are not online, who are disadvantaged, who may not be getting the education they need or do not have access to online learning. I appreciate you cannot solve every problem at once, but we are raising it because it is potentially a serious issue.

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, this is not something that we developed during the coronavirus crisis but if I could signpost you—and maybe this would be a good one to signpost Christian to as well—to the development of the Hungry Little Minds project, which I am sure that the



Select Committee is familiar with, it is an amazing resource. It is very much targeted at those early years. While it was not developed in response to coronavirus, it does have a lot of value in supporting those early years, especially with language development. I know that members of the Committee are very conscious that language development is one of those key determinants as to how well a child does in later life. We would be very keen to get parents and youngsters accessing those resources that have already been created, recognising the importance of the early years environment.

Q104 Jonathan Gullis: With the exams, what conversation has the Department had or is the Department having with Ofqual to ensure that all exam candidates receive a fair grade, and how accessible will the appeals and resit process be in terms of administrative burden and cost?

Gavin Williamson: As part of engagement with stakeholders we have a roundtable, and Ofqual are one of those key members of that roundtable every single week. We have worked incredibly closely with Ofqual. If I could just thank it and the exam boards for the work that they have done, working closely with the sector to try to create a system that is fair and has been in response to this crisis.

Ofqual has launched a major consultation and it has had a very high response. That is a consultation that closes today. We are very keen to make sure that people's input of the concerns that they may have, with the process that Ofqual has outlined, is properly listened to, and we will respond to those concerns. I do not want to pre-empt the consultation, but we will listen very, very closely to those concerns that schools, parents and other organisations have raised in response to this.

For me, the best form of assessment is an exam, and any other form of assessment is not going to be as good as a proper exam serial. That was not an option that was going to be open to me. Can you imagine the amount of uncertainty and the amount of worry that so many children would be having at the moment, and teachers and all those who are working in schools would be having, if we had not outlined what we were going to do and recognising the fact that we were not going to be able to run an exam series? That is why we did what we did.

Can I just add one thing in terms of—

Chair: Very briefly, because we have a fair few questions to go through.

Gavin Williamson: I particularly wanted children, if they did not think that the grade was a true and fair reflection of work or what they were able to achieve, to have the opportunity to sit an exam. That is why we have been working with Ofqual and the exam boards to provide an autumn serial of exams. I think that if people do not feel as if this is the right qualification that they truly deserve, the best way is giving them the opportunity to sit a shortened exam paper and have the opportunity to sit



that exam and get the grade that they truly believe is what they can achieve.

Q105 Jonathan Gullis: I will put two questions together in order to speed up time. Secretary of State, I appreciate that collecting data before 20 March is extremely stressful because, as a former teacher, as you have alluded to, I know that with mock exams, for example, you would have set very challenging papers and probably marked harsher as a way of motivating students. I do fear the impact that will have, especially on the disadvantaged, because it will not necessarily be a true and fair reflection.

I will just come to my two questions, though. One is on the transition phase, especially in the primary sector. What preparations are being made for those currently in year 5 who are due to sit their SATs for the end of key stage 2 in the 2020-21 academic year? Also, on the idea of how we work out these grades, the Fischer Family Trust was set up in order to help with target setting but has said that these are estimates, in its own words, and I wonder if we will be looking at how we use Fischer Family Trust in the future when it comes to target grades.

Gavin Williamson: Jonathan, in terms of exams, as I said, they are the best form of assessment that we can possibly have, but we have particularly asked Ofqual and the exam boards to look at the issues for disadvantaged pupils approaching assessment, and BAME communities as well, as there has been some particular concern that they may be disadvantaged as a result of the process. We asked Ofqual and we asked the exam boards to consider that as part of the work that they were doing and the solution that they are providing around the awarding of grades to pupils.

We are working with a whole range of organisations, and the reason that we are consulting on this is just to make sure—whether it is the Fischer Foundation or others who have really valuable advice and guidance about how we can do this—we can take that on board in terms of how we take this forward.

What is so important is we have a number of transition years, and I want to be getting back to the position where we are doing proper assessments, whether that is through examinations, as rapidly as possible. You highlight year 5. You also highlight years 10 and 12. Those years are going to be facing exams. How can we make sure that we are supporting them so they are in the best position to be able to deal with those exams and succeed in those exams? I am absolutely adamant that we do not want to be disadvantaging those children as a result of this crisis. How we make those interventions to help them, to make sure they succeed—and that gives them the gateway to succeed in so many other things in life—is absolutely pivotal to everything the Department is doing.

Q106 Apsana Begum: Thank you, Secretary of State. You have mentioned the impact of grading and assessments on particular communities, and I just



HOUSE OF COMMONS

wanted to ask for a bit more detail in that area as to what plans and what consultations you are doing with stakeholders and organisations to ensure that there is not an unconscious bias and that is reduced and mitigated in assessments.

Gavin Williamson: Apsana, right at the start of the process we highlighted this as a particular area of concern. In everything that Ofqual did in the creation of the system, of the awarding of grades, it had to be conscious of the fact that there was evidence that a number of youngsters within those communities were in danger of not realising the grade that they would have been achieving if there had been a traditional exam. That is why they have come up with the system that they have. The ability to have a say on this is why they have done the consultation, which is closing today, and I would hope that those communities and organisations that are specialising in this area are using the opportunity of consultation to make their voices heard, so that Ofqual and the exam boards can properly take on board those concerns in terms of what they do and make sure mitigation is put in place to make sure that no one is disadvantaged.

Q107 **Chair:** David Johnston, before I bring you in, I have another question from Caroline Johnson, who has trouble connecting. I ask on her behalf, regarding nurseries and childminders, what thoughts you have on how and when they may be able to reopen.

Gavin Williamson: This would be very much in line with the actions that we take across the whole school and college estate, and it would be considered within the round of that assessment. We would be looking at SAGE to give us the very best advice to make sure that any moves, whether it is bringing nurseries, schools or colleges back, are done to ensure that it is in line with our efforts.

Q108 **David Johnston:** Just very quickly, I have had constituents who home-school their children write to me and quite rightly say that their assessments will not be allowed to form the grades that their children get, so they really need those autumn exams. I know you do not want to pre-empt the consultation but it would be good if you could push for those exams in the autumn to be as early as possible because that is a group that will really need those.

Gavin Williamson: David, you and I are thinking in very much the same space in terms of these exams. We have to work with schools and those who have the ability to be able to put them into action, but I would like to see them at the very earliest stage. We do have practical considerations to consider. This is why having an autumn serial is incredibly important and why we pushed for it.

Q109 **Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State, moving on to the question of independent training providers, why didn't the Department immediately comply with the Cabinet Office guidance and announce support for those providers who have a contract with the Education and Skills Funding



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Agency? Why wasn't that support package automatically done?

Gavin Williamson: We always comply with Cabinet Office guidance and we always will do.

Q110 **Ian Mearns:** The implication is that the Department has not done so on this occasion, so I would ask you to look at that, Secretary of State, please.

What are you doing to safeguard the apprenticeship and skills sector in particular?

Gavin Williamson: Ian, it is a very important point. Obviously the Select Committee is already looking at this, but the most important part is now starting to look at the recovery of this. I see apprenticeships playing a really important role as part of that.

We have taken a whole number of actions about increasing the flexibility so people can continue their apprenticeships. Over 81% of apprenticeships are continuing as we speak, but that means that 19% of apprenticeships are not. What we have been looking at through the ESFA is how we support some of those apprenticeship providers who are not able to continue to deliver apprenticeships, either through online learning or other access for those apprentices, and in those critical areas where we need to reserve that high quality of how we can put a package there to support those providers and make sure that we have a sustainable future in apprenticeships.

I really think that there is an opportunity for us as we come out of this to make sure that we skill our workforce in terms of dealing with a new economy that is going to emerge, some of the newer opportunities that we are going to be facing, but also some of the new challenges we have. We have recently launched the Skills Toolkit, which is specialising in digital resources. We want to be looking at different ways we can do that, but apprenticeships are a key part of that.

Q111 **Chair:** Can I just come in on the Skills Toolkit, which looks like a credible option for people to reskill? Can I just confirm: is it new online learning or are you redirecting people to existing things that are online?

Gavin Williamson: We have worked very closely with providers to look at some of the high-quality resources that were there and we have corralled them together. What I would hope to do is see this as a platform of something that we can grow and, as we develop, put new qualifications and new modules that can be added there for people to access. This would be a platform that becomes larger over time, offering a much larger range of resources. It is existing resources that we have pulled together, but I would like—

Q112 **Chair:** Has the national retraining scheme, the £100 million, been transmogrified into the National Skills Fund, or is it a separate fund? If so, could some of that £100 million be used to help fund these reskilling



HOUSE OF COMMONS

online courses for lifetime learning and people who are working but are not able to at the moment?

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, it is separate from the National Skills Fund. Yes, you are absolutely right and that is exactly what we will be looking at; how we can use the retraining scheme as part of our response to the coronavirus.

Chair: You could use some of those funds to support reskilling. Great.

Q113 **Ian Mearns:** Just to come back, Secretary of State, I have a constituent called Alice who has been attending Newcastle College but her course has been curtailed. She is asking, why is it that A-level students will get a predicted grade based on assessment but she, as a BTEC student, understands that she will not get a predicted grade? She is really concerned about what is going to happen because she has been unable to finish the course at the moment, and she is hoping to do a nursing degree course at Sunderland University. Could you have a look at that, Secretary of State, if there is one rule for one and one rule for another?

Gavin Williamson: Ian, if you would be kind enough maybe to forward the details of the particular qualification that Alice is looking at. We are very keen to give the assessed grades for A-levels but for BTECs as well, and that is largely what is being done.

We do have an issue where on a number of courses—it is a minority of courses—there has to be some on-the-job assessment in order for them to be able to complete it. We are working with the sector to make sure that we are able to complete that final element of assessment, just because you have to show a practical competency in order to be able to complete it. We treated BTECs in exactly the same way as we have treated A-levels, but it is that competency element in terms of practical demonstration that holds us back in a number of areas, and working to make sure Alice and many others are able to complete that at the earliest stage, so they can get the qualification they have worked so hard for, is incredibly important, I know, to you and me.

Q114 **Tom Hunt:** Just a couple of questions. I engaged with a lot of my constituents before this meeting, and a common theme that came up—and it was raised by a number of different people—was the issue of those in reception, so ages four and five, and how important that first year is. So much of it is about relationships, and it is so important to be at class for that formative year. Could we have an idea of the Government's specific plans to address any concerns? I know lots of parents might want their children to repeat that year. If there was a case for summer schooling, it absolutely could well be appropriate for them.

I also have another question with regards to the national review of SEND that the Department of Education is carrying out at the moment. Do you have any idea about timescales and who the Department is going to be talking to on that review?

Earlier this week, finally, when we spoke to the chief inspector of Ofsted,



I was slightly concerned when I found out that under the new framework it might still be possible for a school to be awarded “good” or “outstanding” even if there are serious deficiencies with regards to provision for those with special educational needs. Sorry, that is quite a few questions there. Sorry about that.

Gavin Williamson: Regarding reception, I totally agree about the important role that reception plays. I think all families are feeling a great amount of pressure with having children at home. How we bring schools back again has to be looked at totally within the round, but we do recognise the important role that reception has in that early development of a child and how we support parents to provide home resources for their children at this critical stage. We will continue to do that.

The SEND review is something that we are continuing to do work on. We recognise that it is important. To say that coronavirus has not had an impact in how we have had to deal with that—it will have delayed when the SEND review can report back, but work is still ongoing because we feel that the importance of getting special educational needs provision right is so critical in getting the whole schooling system right. That is something that is felt right across Government.

As you can imagine, a key element of special educational needs—and if we think about education and healthcare plans—is also the health element. As you can understand, there are multiple pressures within the Department of Health at the moment, so we do need to make sure that we do not bring the SEND review to a halt when we do not make sure it is a complete picture and it is a complete result to what we want to do with the special educational needs system.

Q115 **Fleur Anderson:** I would like to jump from early years to the higher education sector and ask a couple of questions about the future for funding and for stability of admissions as well.

The vice-chancellor at my local university says that there is a very significant risk to our financial stability, and I know that universities are extremely worried about their futures and have produced a paper, “Achieving stability in the higher education sector”.

First of all, on international students and that part of the picture, what assessment have you made about the future and the impact of Covid-19 on the international student recruitment, of international students specifically, and also of European Union students who potentially are going to face immigration status changes, and what flexibilities will you be introducing to help lessen this impact?

Gavin Williamson: Thank you ever so much. You raised an important point regarding the international student market. As a Department, along with Universities UK and the Office for Budget Responsibility, we have been doing a considerable amount of work looking at the impacts for the education sector. Universities UK has done a lot of analysis as to the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

potential impact on university finances, and this has been done very closely with the Department for Education and how we respond to this.

On the impact on international students, part of this is going to be when we are coming out of the measures that we have had to impose but also many others have had to impose. At the moment I am not in a position to say when that is going to be, so we cannot put a definitive number as to what impact universities will feel. We are working closely with the university sector and also the Home Office to look at the flexibilities that we can introduce, recognising that people will have difficulty taking English language courses in order to be able to then access university. We have worked closely with the Home Office to put those flexibilities in so that universities are still able to continue their international recruitment, so that they can be in a place when they are welcoming international students into the new academic year.

We are also working more broadly with the sector around a package of measures to bring stability to the system.

Q116 Fleur Anderson: Thank you. You mentioned the package of measures, and Universities UK has asked for substantial funding, for research funding, and stability in student application measures.

There is some speculation that there is a delay or a block on this university bailout because an admissions free-for-all or a wild west situation—there will be quite a change in where students apply to—would leave some universities more exposed financially than others, and then you or the Treasury are able to pick and choose who are saved, rather than saving the sector in a more strategic way. Could you comment on that speculation?

Gavin Williamson: For me, the main concern in terms of universities is for students that are in the universities and making sure that they have the stability to finish their undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. We then also need to make sure that we are safeguarding the amazing research resource that universities have and the important role that they play in our nation and making sure that we are at the forefront of science and technology.

Finally, and it is an incredibly important point, we are making sure that we recognise the important role that universities play in the economy of their local communities. We are wanting to preserve stability for the whole sector, and that is why we have been working closely with Universities UK to ensure that we can deliver that. Those are the three aims of what we are working towards to bring that stability, but we must not forget: yes, it is about the stability of the institutions, but it is about those students that are studying there and making sure that they have the confidence and the belief that we are supporting them to make sure that they realise their aspirations of getting their degrees.

Q117 Fleur Anderson: When will you be likely to be announcing some of these



measures and stability measures?

Gavin Williamson: We are working with the sector around pulling a package together, and we are hoping to do so in the near future.

Q118 **David Johnston:** I appreciate the pressure that HE providers are under, but my question is about HE students. There was a good case that some of them were not getting a lot of contact time to begin with. Some of them have suffered from the strike. They now have a lockdown where they are not getting teaching and they are also being hammered by accommodation costs, particularly—*[Inaudible]* with rented private accommodation. I wondered what your message was to HE students about how the DfE is thinking about them.

Gavin Williamson: For me there is very clear guidance that universities, if they are wishing to get tuition fees, have to provide learning, education and assessment to those students who are paying through student loans in order to be able to access higher education, and that is what is to be expected. Universities have to be doing that in order to be able to claim the fees that students are paying.

Q119 **Fleur Anderson:** We will have to wait to see the package of measures to be able to assess them as a Committee, but thank you for that.

My final question is about the mental health of students. We have indications that there are increasing mental health needs of students who are either locked down away from home or at home but have less support. Do you have an assessment of the increase in mental health needs so that you can put in measures to accommodate them?

Chair: I think this applies across the board in terms of children at home as well, younger children, and the increase in mental health issues.

Gavin Williamson: We have been doing that assessment and we have been looking at different ways we can support children at universities and across the spectrum around dealing with some of those mental health issues that they may be facing.

Q120 **Christian Wakeford:** The Secretary of State has mentioned several times the strategy for reopening schools and that it will follow the advice of SAGE. However, I am just wondering to what extent you are consulting those education bodies as to how that is going to look or if they are able to feed into that conversation. I know when I have spoken to several of my schools and also the nurseries and childcare providers, they have said at the moment they have not been consulted on anything, and they would like to take part in that so they can advise how that would be best represented by them, rather than straight down by Government to the education body.

Gavin Williamson: Christian, I am sure you will appreciate that, with over 22,000 schools and nurseries, it is not really feasible for us to run a consultation with every single organisation right across the country. I myself have been holding regular meetings with the sector and with



organisations that represent the whole spectrum—schools but also unions as well—and the Department has been holding direct talks with different organisations. We have pulled together a sector body that is having regular discussions as to the best ways moving forward, but it is just not going to be feasible to have a UK-wide consultation for people to be able to feed into.

What people will want is clarity and certainty as to how schools and nurseries are going to be reopened, but listening to what the sector is saying, we are doing that and we are doing it absolutely hand in glove with our discussions that we are continuing to hold as to how that is best done.

Q121 Christian Wakeford: Thank you, Secretary of State. A follow-up question, although slightly more generic, would be: what do you think the Department can learn from this whole situation of Covid-19? What has gone well? What has not gone well? What are the lessons we are moving forward with?

Gavin Williamson: There are a whole host of different areas that we can learn and benefit from. The ability to support children within the home and through holidays has really been transformed by a lot of the learning that we have had in terms of delivering, home education and support that we can give children. We have recognised that resources can be much more rapidly shared. We are going to be taking a look at how we can use some of the resources that have been shared and reducing teacher workload around lesson planning, resource sharing, making sure that teachers are getting the very best practice and being able to use it and bring it to their classrooms.

On EHC plans and tribunals, by moving them online we are getting through the backlog of tribunal appeals much more rapidly than by being there in person. Can this be something that we learn from and start looking at how we can implement it?

I have set up a whole strand of work looking at recovery in the Department, because so often there are so many things that we want to do in education but we don't do because of a disruption that it may be causing to the sector. As part of the work that we have initiated: what lessons can we learn, good things that have come out of this crisis that have meant that we can do things better, but also different things that we may want to change in our education system that in previous times we have always said we will not do because of the disruptive effect it has to education?

Q122 Christian Wakeford: One quick follow-up, which is more on the resilience point of view but that is more relating to virtual schools and EHC plans. I have been speaking to a number of parents with children with EHC plans. They have put forward some suggestions for spending in regard to those plans that they feel would benefit their children most but have been turned down by the local authority. To what extent is that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

being considered by the DfE so that the children are learning as much as they can at home and their parents would see so?

In regards to virtual schools, looked-after children are arguably our most vulnerable children, so what work is being done with virtual schools to make sure that CLAs are the ones that are maintaining their schools as much as possible so that they are not missing out and having the double whammy of essentially being vulnerable and missing education at the same time?

Gavin Williamson: This is why we have particularly targeted that cohort in terms of the digital package that we are rolling out. Regarding parents who think that their children who have an EHC plan would benefit from a reworking of that EHC plan, we would really encourage local authorities to demonstrate as much flexibility as possible in changing and adapting the way that they allow people to access learning. We do not want people to be in that position where they are overly falling further behind as a result of this crisis.

Q123 David Simmonds: The OBR has published something to the effect that it thinks the impact of Covid-19 could have a devastating effect on the education sector. I know we are all very conscious that schools in some cases were in a perilous financial position in the run-up to the crisis. Other schools, specifically some in my constituency, may have many millions of pounds in balances in the bank and are, therefore, well positioned to cope with it.

I am interested in the assessment the Department is making of those risks and what steps you think the Department might need to take to guard against a financially devastating impact on some schools as a consequence of the pandemic.

Gavin Williamson: We were distinctly conscious of the fact that with the change in how schools are running and just being open to critical workers, those vulnerable children may have an impact on school finances. That is why we put in place funds for schools to be able to apply for up to £75,000-worth of resources to be able to cover costs that they may incur. We have as yet had no indication that schools are facing a negative impact in the way that you would maybe be concerned about, and I think that is partly down to the fact that we have put in place provision, whether it is for primary schools or secondary schools, support that they are able to call on if there are those abnormal costs that they would maybe be incurring. We have not had those reports that schools are facing that financial dilemma as a result of the coronavirus crisis, but I would hope that that has been helped and supported by the actions that we have undertaken right at the start.

Chair: Any more, David? That is all?

Q124 David Simmonds: No. That is helpful. I think the key question is going to be as the OBR fleshes out what it means by that impact, that the Department is able to respond to that. Clearly, the significant levels of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

balances held by some schools are an important part of that, but some of the other providers, including among the skills sector, will also be impacted. It is about making sure that that is monitored for that impact as it plays out.

Gavin Williamson: David, you are right to highlight some differing sectors as to how they will be impacted differently. You see the HE sector, the FE sector, the broader skills sector and also the early years sector. They will have different types of impacts as a result of this crisis than you will see in the broad primary and secondary school sector, and we are working very closely, as we have indicated, to make sure that we take early action to help support them in the best ways that we can.

Q125 Ian Mearns: Just following up from David's question and the point that he has raised about school balances, I thought it would be important to make the point that overall the levels of school balances have diminished and it is not a uniform or universal issue across all of the school estate. There will be many schools out there who may be watching this morning on Parliament TV who would not recognise the question of there being healthy school balances that they have to call on in such a drastic situation as we are in at the moment.

Gavin Williamson: Ian, this is why we put in place the action to make sure there was a fund available for schools to be able to call on if they had incurred expenses as a result of dealing with this crisis.

Q126 Fleur Anderson: Just to follow up on this in terms of nursery funding and private nurseries, many nurseries have been in contact with me saying they are in financial difficulties, and this will not be in education funding. This will be you in conversation with the Treasury about how to treat them as small businesses that are in trouble but that we do not want to lose a lot of our early years sector through falling through the gaps in the Treasury scheme. Many felt that they would get the education funding, the early years special funding, as well as being able to furlough staff, and they have been told that they cannot. This seems to be a change in the rules. Are there conversations with the Treasury, and do you know how many nurseries are in potential trouble and could be closing?

Gavin Williamson: Right from the start of this crisis we have put in measures to support the early years provision, and we have seen the fact that we continue to pay the grants to local authorities for those to be passported through to early years providers. On top of that, you have the furlough scheme as well as a whole raft of extra provisions that the Treasury has provided for supporting many small businesses and many larger businesses as well. Of course, you do have a number of large chains that also provide early years provision.

We are working very closely with early years providers to have an understanding of where some of the weaknesses are in the sector, but we have always been clear—and the Treasury was clear from the start of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

launching the furlough scheme—that you cannot be getting a Government grant and then also getting an additional payment on top of that for money that is covering those staff. I think most people would recognise that we do have a duty and responsibility in terms of payment of public money and we cannot be in a situation of paying for two things twice. We continue to work with Treasury but also, most importantly, we continue to work with early years providers to make sure we do everything we can do to support them, as well as with local government, in preserving this critically important sector that I think everyone wants to see back up and running at the earliest opportunity and at the right time, as so many parents depend on it.

Q127 Chair: Can I just ask you something very briefly? The Department for Education apparently has not yet clarified whether or not nursing students who work for the NHS during the pandemic are still paying tuition fees. Are they paying tuition fees? If they are, can you make sure that they are not paying for tuition that they are not receiving?

Gavin Williamson: I will come back to you on that point, Mr Chairman.

Q128 Apsana Begum: Moving on to technical and post-18 education, given the concerns raised and voiced by, among others, awarding bodies for T-levels, why is the Department now pressing ahead with the introduction of T-levels?

Gavin Williamson: As you will probably remember, Apsana, this was a programme that had absolute cross-party support, with the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats all supporting the introduction of T-levels. We are proposing to bring forward three T-level qualifications across 55 providers across the United Kingdom. I personally think the introduction of T-levels and raising the status of technical and vocational qualifications is one of the most important tasks that this Government has. I am very keen to make sure that we continue with this programme, and we have been working really closely with a small number of providers.

As we roll this programme out, we reckon that we can learn a lot by the experience of doing it, but we also want to create the opportunity for young people to benefit from this really brilliant qualification that is the equivalent of an A-level, with the status of an A-level, that is going to have a really transformational impact. For me, technical and vocational qualifications are such an important part. I know that this is something that has had cross-party support, the importance of this. I want to see it happen and I want to make it happen. I do not want to see children and youngsters missing out on the opportunity of having that choice.

Q129 Apsana Begum: The Augar review was published last May. I appreciate that definitely there is a disruption to the Government's response, but can you explain what has been done with its proposals since the publication in May last year?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Gavin Williamson: Of course. We had been planning to publish our response to the Augar review around the period of the spending review coming out, which was expected to be around the July time of this year. That looks as if that has been pushed back. That has been pushed back, so we will be still looking at doing the response in line with the spending review.

We have done a considerable amount of work and we have recently set up a White Paper task force with Keith Smith from the Department leading it in terms of further education. That will be one of the key elements and key planks of our response to the Augar review. Keith has been doing an immense amount of work and, as I say, we will be responding to Augar in line with the spending review, but there is an awful lot of work that is going on. Keith is leading this work on the FE White Paper. It is an area of the Department's work that I think could be really revolutionary in driving reform in this vital sector. It is incredibly vital for those youngsters.

Q130 **Chair:** Thank you. There are some private schools that are behaving very responsibly and trying to work to support students and state schools, but I have had a note that there are some independent schools that are billing parents for as much as £8,000, including a discount, for just two weeks of online A-level tuition amid school closures. For children to be given A-level grade recommendations, the pupils must be on the school register. To be on the school's register, the parents must pay the fees. It is a Catch-22 situation.

What steps are the Government taking to ensure that bad practice does not occur and that independent schools do not use this to capitalise on changes to exam grading in this way while learning does not take place—*[Inaudible]* state sector, those schools, and help teach the left-behind pupils?

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, I do apologise but I lost you in part of that. In terms of private schools, the Department does not have any role in the contractual agreements that they have between themselves and parents, but obviously we would ask everyone to act in the most considerate and sensible and responsible of ways. I know that right across the whole education system everyone is in rapid development and ensuring that they are delivering teaching for every child. I am particularly proud of the work that has been done in the state sector, which obviously we have direct control over.

I would of course encourage all private schools—and you are right to highlight that there have been some brilliant examples of what they are doing to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds. I would ask them to look at what more can be done, how we can support vulnerable children, and can they play a bigger role in doing that, and not just through this crisis but also into the future?

Q131 **Chair:** If it is true that they are charging £8,000 for two weeks of online



HOUSE OF COMMONS

A-level tuition and they cannot get their A-level grades unless they pay that £8,000, would you say that is probably bad practice?

Gavin Williamson: What I would say is that is a contractual agreement between a private sector organisation and parents, but it is absolutely, vitally important that all children who want to take their A-levels have the ability to do so. No one should be held over a barrel of being able to be put into that position of people's futures to be threatened.

Q132 Ian Mearns: Thank you very much, Secretary of State. Coming back to your earlier responses about what you think the Department can learn from the Covid-19 situation, one of the things that has come to my attention—and I am very closely connected, so it is not a shock—is that my local authority has had to do an enormous amount of additional work in adult social care but also in children's services and resilience planning. Particularly in relation to co-ordinating what is happening in the education sector, it seems that local authorities still have an awful lot of responsibility but not so much jurisdiction these days over the different stakeholders that are working out there in the field.

Also, on top of that, Secretary of State, my own local authority tells me that while it has been given additional resources, it believes it is only about 25% of what it has additionally spent to cover all of these different responsibilities. Is there anything that the DfE as a Department can learn from that and feed back into Government?

Gavin Williamson: On your latter point, the Communities Secretary has set out a package of over £3 billion directly supporting local authorities, which is one of the biggest packages that you have seen of direct support for local authorities to help them at this time. We all recognise the important work that they are doing, and I would certainly hope, as that money flows through, those concerns that your local authority has will be alleviated. I know that the MHCLG is working on the allocations as to what that means for each individual local authority.

Separately, regarding the role that local authorities play in schools, they have played a really important role working with multi-academy trusts and working with individual schools in terms of co-ordination. I think we have all truly valued that. The leadership that we have seen within individual schools and multi-academy trusts to provide a route into access to education has been truly inspiring. That collaboration that we have seen right across the board has been one of the great benefits.

Chair: Caroline, are you there? Can you hear? Caroline Johnson? Would you like me to ask your question? The line does not sound great.

Q133 Dr Caroline Johnson: I could try. I have constituents who are stuck at university and unable to return to their families. They are often—*[Inaudible]*. What consideration is being given by the Department on allowing them a single move home?

Chair: Caroline, I do not think that came over. Shall I repeat it, if you do not mind? Can you hear me, Secretary of State?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Gavin Williamson: I can, Mr Chairman.

Chair: Great. What Caroline is asking is she has constituents who are stuck at university, unable to return home to their families and often alone. What consideration is being given to allowing them a single move home, should they wish?

Gavin Williamson: Is this for domestic students particularly or international students?

Chair: I think she is talking about domestic. Yes, she is. Domestic students.

Gavin Williamson: I think this is something that we would very much want to facilitate, and we would certainly hope that students would be able to return home if there are no issues around safeguarded individuals in that house.

Q134 **Ian Mearns:** In a similar vein, Secretary of State, is the Department doing anything to look at the position of estranged students, students who are estranged from their own parents, and what support they are being given at the moment if the university has closed but they are stuck in a university town and have nowhere to go back to?

Gavin Williamson: This is why we were very keen to work with universities at the earliest stage to make sure that those youngsters who are so vulnerable were able to stay within accommodation and were not being literally kicked out. I think it is a credit to the university sector how it has responded.

It is also really important if we look at a slightly younger age group, those children in care. I have asked all local authorities to make sure that children who are in care who are coming up to the age of 18—there could be no worse time to be leaving care than at this moment, and I am wanting all local authorities to make it absolutely clear to any child who is in care that they do not have to be leaving care and that they will continue to be supported at this time. I think it is these actions that will make a real difference to young people and make a difference to their future life chances.

Q135 **Tom Hunt:** I have a university in my constituency and I have been contacted by the student union and a number of students. Because there are no courses, it is all online, they are not currently in their student accommodation and they have not been for a while and they will not be for a while longer. Probably about three months, four months potentially, they will not have been in their student accommodation, yet they are still being expected to pay full rent there. A lot of them are fairly concerned about that, and I was wondering if the Government had a view on that.

Gavin Williamson: In terms of universities and halls of residence, we have been very keen to make it absolutely clear that we certainly hope that universities are not charging students for that accommodation.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Regarding private landlords, the Government has set up a number of schemes to support people that are in those private agreements, and we very much hope that people look at those as to how they take access to them. We have been consistently very clear with universities and people who provide halls of residence as to the approach that we would like them to take.

Chair: Thank you, everybody. Thank you very much, Secretary of State. I am guessing with the announcement now of the new child of the Prime Minister and Carrie there will be a big focus on early years with the Department in the coming months. I really do appreciate what you have done, and also we thank teachers and support staff but we also thank the thousands of DfE officials who have been working overtime to try to solve these very, very difficult issues. I do appreciate you sitting here for over two hours answering a sustained barrage of questions on a huge range of issues and wish you well over the next few weeks. As you can see, the focus of the Committee is on the left-behind children, pupils and students and particularly how the vulnerable are going to fare in the aftermath of this. Thank you very much for coming today.