



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [The Government's Catch-up programme](#), HC 940

Tuesday 25 January 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 25 January 2022.

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

Questions 85 - 116

Witnesses

I: Orienne Langley-Sadler, Headteacher, Elms Bank School and College; John Blaney, Executive Headteacher, BMAT STEM; Ruth Holden, Executive Headteacher, Mulberry Academy Shoreditch; Jo Coton, Chief Executive Officer/Executive Headteacher, NET Academies Trust; Andy Green, Principal, Copleston High School; Jill Thompson, Headteacher, Kelvin Grove Primary School; and Nicola Shipman, Chief Executive Officer, Steel City Schools Partnership.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Orienne Langley-Sadler, John Blaney, Ruth Holden, Jo Coton, Andy Green, Jill Thompson and Nicola Shipman.

Q85 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the Education Select Committee. Thank you very much for agreeing to come as part of our headteacher's roundtable. We are looking predominantly at the catch-up programme today, but we have a number of other areas that we would like to ask you.

For the benefit of those watching on Parliament TV and the tape that is being recorded, could you introduce yourselves and your school? I will start with my left. Nicola.

Nicola Shipman: Good morning, my name is Nicola Shipman. I am CEO of Steel City Schools Partnership. That is a MAT of nine primary settings in the City of Sheffield.

Orienne Langley-Sandler: Good morning, my name is Orienne Langley-Sandler. I am the headteacher of a special needs school, Elms Bank School and College, situated in Bury. We are also part of a MAT, Oak Learning Partnership, which has a primary and secondary school within it. Pleased to see everybody this morning.

Jill Thompson: I am Jill Thompson. I am headteacher of Kelvin Grove Primary School. We are two-form-entry, from nursery to year 6. I have been head since November 2019. We are a fabulous and diverse school. We have 51% of our children with English is an additional language. It is a very strong community, but we are a community with challenges, with around 50% of our children on free school meals. A very strong community but with its challenges.

Ian Mearns: I am chair of the governors.

Chair: We have a declaration of interest from our deputy Chair of the Committee, Ian Mearns. Next is John Blaney who, of course, I know. Thank you for coming.

John Blaney: Morning, I am John Blaney, executive headteacher of BMAT STEM in Harlow and assistant CEO in BMAT, which is a group of primary and secondary schools in Essex and east London.

Ruth Holden: I am Ruth Holden, executive headteacher at Mulberry Schools Trust based in Tower Hamlets in the east end of London. The trust I am in has five schools but is growing. We are in a very socially deprived area with the majority of our students being pupil premium. Nice to meet you all.

Andy Green: My name is Andy Green. I am the principal at Copleston High School in Ipswich, which is a large town in Suffolk, as you know. There are approximately 1,900 students in our school from the 11 to 18 range, with a fairly large sixth form inclusive in that. We are a very



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diverse catchment. Ipswich is a very diverse town, a social mobility area. We are part of the Gippeswyk Community Educational Trust, which is a relatively small trust within the town.

Chair: I should declare an interest; I know Jo very well also.

Jo Coton: My name is Jo Coton, I am the CEO of NET Academies, which comprises six primary schools in Essex, five of which are in Harlow, which is an area of high deprivation.

Q86 **Chair:** Could you set out briefly how you see the state of play and then I will pass on to my colleague, Miriam, to chair the first session. Thank you all for everything you have done for your teachers and support staff to try to keep our children learning in these incredibly difficult circumstances.

Jo Coton: The current state of play: it is obviously very welcome to have all the children back with a lot of the measures removed, so that we can almost carry on with business as usual. I wish we could say it was. For us in Essex, Covid is still having a considerable impact in schools with regards to people, staff and children being unwell. This has led to disjointed learning, inconsistent teaching and regular absence at the moment.

The quality of what the children are receiving—particularly with the catch-up interventions—has not been as progressive as we would have liked because of regular absence. In turn, that has had an impact on the quality of remote education. We were very proud of the remote education we offered during the lockdown period but, obviously, when teachers are back in class with a majority of the class in school, that has had an equally detrimental effect for those children having to work from home.

As for the pitch for teachers, I think the workload is obviously another conversation, but just mentally for staff having to work constantly to catch these children up only for them to be away for a certain period of time and so on, that has been a considerable impact at the moment.

We have looked for solutions. I did not want to come here to just moan and to say, “Well, this is how it is”. For us, we are looking hopefully at when the scientists say we can remove the isolation period. Interestingly, four out of five teachers that were absent due to Covid last week at a school were able to teach remotely because they were well enough. There is something in that in terms of when children are also absent. If they are unwell obviously they are unwell and they stay at home, some of them are well enough to be in school but at the moment cannot be for obvious reasons. I hope that is what you meant and is succinct enough.

Andy Green: I would concur with what Jo has just said. It has been great to have the children back in school and face-to-face learning has had a very positive impact. Here at our school, we have had unprecedented levels of staff absence because of Covid, which has made it quite difficult and has caused some disjointed learning. However, as



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was previously said, there has been some positives to come out of the Covid experience and staff have been able to teach remotely when they have been absent from school. The whole online learning process has supported and helped many students but there has been quite a lot of disjointed learning—some students having longer periods away from school than others. That would be the picture.

I think when the restrictions go it will be a positive. I think the students have also found wearing face masks very demanding. We have been fairly strict on that as a trust to try to keep Covid levels down. The students have been magnificent but the teaching and learning in the classroom, while teachers are teaching in masks and students have to wear masks for five hours a day, has been very demanding. There are many positives to draw from as well. We try to be as positive as we possibly can, because that is what the children would want us to do.

Chair: Thank you. That was very succinct.

Ruth Holden: The same as Jo and Andy. Rather than repeat what has been said—because we have exactly the same issues with the staff and so on—I will talk more widely about things such as catering staff, maybe who are not our own staff. Cleaning contracts and catering contracts have been hit with staff absences as well. You end up dealing with lots of things that usually run quite smoothly. You find out three out of nine catering staff are ill, so the head of that company that you pay to provide food comes to see you first thing in the morning and says, “We have staffing issues”. When you are running schools it is not just the teachers, it is the knock-on effect from the other things.

All focus in schools is going into the year groups that have exams this year but, because you prioritise those year groups, we are concerned about the year groups underneath those. For me, year 12 and year 10, we are already very worried about them because everything that we are doing is to get the current year 11 and 13s through. We have not yet been told completely about the exams, which I know we are talking about later.

The other thing about masks—particularly in the community here in Tower Hamlets—lots of our students live in very poor housing, in multigenerational housing. Even on Thursday when restrictions go, they will be encouraged by their parents and grandparents to wear masks and to carry on wearing masks. One of the things we decided on two years ago was not have any conflict during this terrible set of circumstances, so we will let people wear masks when they want to because they are scared.

John Blaney: As most people have said, it is great to have the children back. I think remote learning has been no real substitute for face-to-face in-class learning, and all that comes with that in terms of the positive relationships that teachers have with pupils. One of the big challenges for us at the minute now are the messages that the pandemic is over and



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that in wider society things are back to normal, when on the ground in schools that is not quite the case. In fact, one of our schools in the trust is operating at the moment with almost 50% of staff off isolating. Although reducing the number of days when adults are isolating is helping because we can get back to proper face-to-face learning much quicker.

I do recognise all of the positives that have been said and it is great to have the children back, but I do think we still have to recognise the challenges we still face due to still quite high levels of absences from staff and pupils and all that comes with that.

Jill Thompson: I very much agree with what John was saying. It has been utterly fabulous having the children back and they have been amazing, considering what they have been through, but we are struggling with staffing. At one point last term, we had just less than half our staff out. That was a real challenge. We are lucky we have three high-level teaching assistants in our school, which is quite unusual for a primary. They were able to do an awful lot of cover, but you cannot cover 11 staff in that way.

It was very much to the point where we could not get supply staff either. Trying five different agencies and not able to get cover from supply staff because other schools were in a very similar situation. We ended up with myself and my deputy head teaching, and we were very much relying on the fabulous teaching assistants who also helped out and stepped up. That is not sustainable long term. We had another week like that last week where I and my deputy head were in class, and the teaching assistant had to step in. I think that is something that needs to be acknowledged, that is still an issue going forward. Hopefully, as we talked about, with the isolation changing, that will become less of an issue.

The other thing that is very important to note is that, understandably, there has been a lot of focus on that lost learning. The thing we have noticed is that our children have come back really struggling with their wellbeing and their emotional resilience. That is something that we need to look at as a much broader picture. If we focus on it, that is something that is going to take years and we need to think about what we are doing to support our children's mental health.

I know that we will talk about that a bit later but to me that is a real priority because we have found that our children have come back a little bit bewildered. They have all had very different experiences through lockdown. In particular, our youngest children who are starting school now in nursery reception have had a hugely significant part of their life and their developmental time possibly isolating, possibly not seeing many people. We are generally seeing children responding emotionally maybe two years younger than they would normally. Therefore, in our nursery and in our reception, we have children that are very much like toddlers



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because they do not know how to interact socially. That has to be a focus.

The academic has to happen but that is not going to happen if we do not get that mental health and that child development right. As a school we are very much focusing on looking at wellbeing and mental health. I think that has to be the national picture. We have to look at that.

Orienne Langley-Sandler: I concur with everything that my colleagues have said, particularly the thread that Jill has put on the table in terms of mental wellbeing. That has been a significant impact on my young learners with special educational needs.

The other thing I want to raise is at policy-making level, if measures are being disbanded on Thursday, is that the same for areas that are still suffering with high levels of Covid? For example, because we are within the Bury area, my school has had quite significant Covid cases throughout the autumn term. We are under public health guidance, so we have stricter measures put in our school through public health. I want to see a dovetailing of that advice and not necessarily a clash of advice. What that led to was, even when masks were put into school, we were already at that stage. There needs to be kind of a wholesale look at the advice when measures are reduced.

Nicola Shipman: I suppose the joy of going last is I think everybody has said most of what I was also going to add. I absolutely concur with everything everybody has said so far. I would like to add a couple of other aspects for us as a trust.

Being part of a trust is a great benefit, because we can use resource across our schools. Particularly in primary schools—in some of our smaller primary schools we only have 350 pupils—we make sure that those critical roles are covered on a daily basis: you have leadership members of staff, you have paediatric members of staff, first aid trained staff and you have DSLs. If you have a team out, that can cause quite significant challenge.

We can get support from other schools, but it is really important that we are managing on a day-to-day basis. For instance, in one of our schools today we have over a quarter of the staff away and we have a fifth of our pupils away. The roles that they cover, the majority of them are teaching, so front facing.

The other aspect that is becoming a bit larger in our lives at the moment is the return of Ofsted. I am an Ofsted inspector as well. A number of our schools—seven out of our nine—are due for inspection and are somewhere in the window. The impact of Covid on the quality of education at this time with not the same teachers, not the same members of staff, supply teachers, the inability to get supply teachers because they are tutors or they are not, is not normal. It has to be clear to Ofsted coming into our schools that it is possibly not going to be



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seeing the quality of education that we would normally want to be delivering and would be delivering, because the workforce is not necessarily there to support us.

We have high Covid rates and, as a trust, we have maintained those safety measures. I think it was Jill or maybe John who mentioned about that reassurance for staff and reassurance for families and communities.

Chair: I am going to pass to Miriam now to chair the first session. It may be that we do not come to all of you to answer, just because of time. We have strict broadcasting limits, so it may be that we just ask one or two of you.

Q87 **Miriam Cates:** It is great to see you all. Lovely to see you, Nicola. One of the schools in Steel City Partnership is in my constituency.

We have already touched on masks. This is a question to the secondary heads. Over Christmas there was some debate about whether schools would reopen. Fortunately, they did but we saw this mask mandate in the classrooms as well as in corridors. A couple of weeks later the rules changed, so no more masks in classrooms and, from 27 January, no more masks in corridors.

I have personally stood up against forcing children to wear masks for wellbeing issues, but I am just interested in how your students have handled those very quick changes in advice and directions. What is the spread of opinion and feelings among your students and how have you helped them to handle that? This is just for the secondaries really, so can we start with John?

John Blaney: I think we know children are very resilient and very adaptable. To be honest with you, they have responded very well when the rule changes have been very clear, when everybody across society was following the rules, clear about what the rules were. We were communicating that very clearly to parents and children. To be honest with you, we had very little in the way of conflict around masks.

Like some of my other colleagues have said, now as things are changing it feels a little bit that things are changing ahead of what is happening in terms of the science, etc. but we will still encourage children, if they feel comfortable and safe to do so, to wear masks. I think it makes adults and staff feel safe, and it makes other children around them feel safe. We know that, as the messages are very different from what they are seeing on TV and what they are hearing from other parts of society, it is going to be very difficult to enforce that in schools. However, on the whole, if we are very clear with the children about why and they understand the importance of it, I do think we will still allow children and adults to wear masks in school. I don't think there would be any reason not to allow them to do that.

Orienne Langley-Sandler: Many of my young people are not obliged to wear masks because obviously all of them have special educational



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needs. What we have found is that many of the children have wanted to, and we have encouraged children to wear masks where they can do so independently, because obviously many of my students need support in being able to wear a mask correctly and then that negates the effectiveness of wearing masks.

As John said, I think my students have been very flexible and responsive. From my previous point, we have been encouraged to wear masks in classrooms through public health. Obviously, because communication can be very limited within my student body, they have responded very positively about that. They have seen that they are doing their bit.

We would welcome that restriction being taken away because I think communication is hampered. I think many of my students rely on facial expressions, not necessarily just through cognitive learning but almost that hidden curriculum in terms of being able to feel safe and secure and being able to read everybody's faces. We would welcome that. In terms of students responding positively, they certainly have done.

Ruth Holden: I think the pandemic has highlighted and shown how schools are quite pivotal in communities. Our job is to educate but we have always known they do more than that. The pandemic has shown that more. I feel like over the last two years I have been more of a civic leader than I have an educational leader: running food banks, delivering laptops, doing lots of visits to high-rise flats during the pandemic and things like that. The Bengali and Somali communities that we predominantly serve have been scared and so wearing masks has not been a problem at all.

Young people are fantastic. I love kids and I think they get quite bad press. The news always depicts a stabbing or a death when the majority of young people are very nice, very respectful and aspirational themselves. There has not been any problem with students following rules as long as they are clear.

The other thing that has happened in the pandemic is that communication channels have become clearer. Before the pandemic we did good communication, but I think the pandemic led to really good communication: a weekly letter to parents—translated if needed—a weekly newsletter highlighting all the lovely enrichment and pastoral things we were continuing to do. Communities have come together more. There has just been no problem with that. I do understand that we have a number of students who are exempt from wearing masks. We have given them a very visible yellow badge to say, "I am exempt," so that does not cause any people to think, "You are not bothering."

Also loads of our students get on buses, the tube, the DLR and the overground in London. I think they have seen adults not following the rules, which has been very interesting because I think they have been quite outraged by that—by people in society not following the rules when



they are. I will not add to what everybody else has said but that is how I felt the last two years.

Andy Green: As my colleagues have said, my students have been magnificent. We have not had any issues at all of students refusing to wear masks or not buying in to wearing masks. We have had some students that have been exempt who wear a lanyard. As a trust, very early on in the pandemic when you only had to wear masks in communal areas, we took the choice to wear masks in classrooms. I was not entirely sure that Covid would know the difference between a corridor and a classroom, therefore we chose to have masks in classrooms as well. Quite a few of our students actually spoke to some of the local media about how you can sit next to somebody in a classroom and you can touch elbows but you do not have to wear a mask, but when you are outside in a communal area you do. It seemed an interesting point, but we all understood, for wellbeing reasons, why that decision may have been taken.

The students have been absolutely great. They have worn masks in classrooms almost throughout and certainly always in communal areas. Currently, as we move towards a reduction in restrictions, students are now only required to wear masks in communal areas. I looked around the school yesterday and a huge percentage still choose to wear them in classrooms, because I think they understand that there is a trade-off. They understand that, yes, it is difficult sometimes for communication and it is difficult for mental health and wellbeing reasons but, equally, when we roll back on masks, I suspect the trade-off will be that there will be an increase in Covid rates. The students are aware of that trade-off. They are very sensible, and they are very mature about it.

Miriam Cates: Thank you. It is interesting that you say that because, obviously, the DfE brought the mandate in in January because it said there was evidence that masks did reduce transmission. It published the evidence, and it has been widely pulled apart by experts—that there is no statistical difference between wearing them and not. As you say, it will be interesting to see how that pans out as restrictions are removed. Tom, I think you want to come in.

Q88 **Tom Hunt:** With regards to the teaching staff wearing face masks, I would be interested to know from the panellists roughly what proportion of your staff have chosen to wear a face mask.

Andy Green: Morning, Tom, I am happy to go first. I would say that the vast majority of teachers in our school choose to wear masks. As the pandemic has progressed, I would not say that anybody has a sense of excitement about wearing the masks, but they realise that they are doing it to protect themselves and to protect the students. They have a commitment to want to be in school. They want to be in front of the young people. They do not want to have to be at home. If they believe that they can do things to protect themselves and to protect the



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students, they are doing that. I would say 95% of staff in classrooms are wearing masks, and have worn them fairly consistently.

Jill Thompson: From a primary point of view, obviously the children do not wear masks, but all of our staff—we agreed this as a staff—felt that they should wear masks in corridors and in any communal areas. Our staff generally mix with just one class, which is very different to secondary. When they are in the classroom they take the mask off with those 30 children, but throughout all of the other communal areas every single one of my staff wears a mask.

They have all said that they are feeling very much that they would like to continue that once this mandate has changed. It gives them that security and I think it helps with staff wellbeing as well as anything else. The children have not flickered at that at all. They see their teacher in the classroom without a mask but around the corridors they know that staff wear masks throughout.

Tom Hunt: The key point here is the percentage who wear masks in the classroom when they are teaching. That is what I am interested in knowing—not so much about in the corridors and so on.

Jo Coton: From a primary perspective, we have never worn masks, obviously, in terms of teaching early years and with the children. Interestingly, until the Omicron variant, we did not notice that staff were getting more or less unwell than the children. It did not seem to be an issue there. The different variants are obviously more contagious, but I would not personally promote that from a primary perspective, neither have the staff. For my staff anyway, the fact that there are around 30 children in a classroom, wearing a mask in a corridor does not necessarily, make them feel any safer. I think the fact that the majority of them were in school throughout the pandemic, rightly or wrongly, they have got used to that.

Nicola Shipman: I would also echo that. What I would say, in terms of percentage wise, I think of our 500 staff across our trust it is less than 1% of our staff that have chosen or asked to wear a mask. I think those that have some sort of underlying medical condition. We are absolutely fine with that. They have had visors—shields—to keep that face to face and the ability to read lips. One of our schools has an integrated resource for children with special needs who need to be able to see those cues—that visual of the teacher's face. From a primary perspective, very few, but we have supported them in doing so if they felt the need to do that.

Orienne Langley-Sandler: Very much the opposite from my colleagues here. I would say 100% of my staff have worn masks or shields. We also have a high proportion of nursing staff within our school, so very early on in the pandemic nursing staff were instructed to wear full PPE. Many of the tasks delegated to my staff are akin to medical procedures, so my staff have felt more confident wearing masks and continue to do so, even



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though we do recognise that that is a barrier for communication and wellbeing as I have expressed before.

I think it was Ruth that described our role as kind of civic leaders. It is treading the path of being able to balance staff's anxiety around the situation as well as their drive to want to be there for our young people. That has manifested itself within my school as all staff wanting to wear masks.

Q89 Miriam Cates: I am going to have to move on. Tom, I will get you in if I can.

You have all talked about the impact of staff absences and that continues to be a challenge. How effective do you think the Government's support for schools has been with regard to staff absences, both in terms of the guidance but also in helping with supply costs and flexibility and things like that? I am not going to be able to come to everybody so hands up who wants to answer that question.

Chair: What should the Government be doing to help with teacher absences? What are they not doing right and what should they be doing?

Jill Thompson: We have struggled with this because I know that there has been the opportunity for schools to claim back, but the guidelines are very specific, and we have not been able to claim anything back so far. We have been hit very much with the cost of supply and—particularly as others have said—we are struggling to get supply now. There are not the staff out there. I don't know whether that is because lots of schools are in the same situation or doing the tutoring programme, but we are routinely contracting five different agencies and we are not able to get anybody.

There is a real issue there with staffing—if we are going to have the same kind of absences—of how we physically get the bodies in classrooms. That is my biggest worry going forward with staffing.

John Blaney: I completely agree with what Jill has said. It has been nigh-on impossible to get supply teachers into schools because there is a national issue around supply teachers. I do think it is a wider discussion about long-term investment in education, in teaching, keeping teachers in the classroom and looking at reasons why teachers left. I think that is a wider discussion around why this shortage has had such an impact now.

If we want to avoid such issues in the future we need a long-term strategy about keeping teachers in the classroom and, also, getting some teachers back. Some of the attempts to get some teachers back has not been as successful as we or the Government would have liked. There is a longer-term discussion around that. We have definitely struggled to get supply teachers in where there have been vacancies as a result of staff absence.



Nicola Shipman: I would echo that but, what I would also say is, I think one of the challenges has been many supply teachers and supply agencies offering the NTP, the tutoring programme. They have a vested interest for themselves as a tutor but then we cannot get supply teachers. Some of our schools are strategically overstaffed, but even when we are overstaffed we are understaffed. We have to use our staff carefully and strategically within our own schools. We have not seen the deluge of recently retired or left teachers coming back and knocking on our door offering their services. That is a potential challenge in terms of DBS, but also teaching the curriculum that we need them to teach: the early reading and phonics. It is critical that we have skilled practitioners if these children are going to catch up the way we want them to do.

No disrespect to retired teachers. There are some incredibly skilled people out there, but they do not have the most recent CPD that some of our schools need to be able to deliver the curriculum in the way that we need it to be delivered for children to catch up.

Chair: I am going to pass to my colleague, Brendan, to talk about catch-up and the national tutoring programme.

Q90 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** To start with, what are the main challenges you have had in terms of the academic side—pupil's progress—and what it has been like since they have been returning to face-to-face teaching? Specifically on that point, how successful has the Government's education recovery programme been in helping you through that? Andy, I will come to you first.

Andy Green: The recovery programme has been welcomed and the recovery catch-up funding has been welcomed. We haven't chosen to use the national tutors. For me personally, the reason for that is a variation in quality. We have some magnificent staff here who have provided an awful lot of catch-up tutoring in English, maths, science, history, geography, some of it physically face to face, some of it is online sessions, 5.30 pm to 6.30 pm, 7 pm until 8 pm in the evening.

I am very fortunate in a large secondary school—and I make the point that I am very fortunate in the difference between a primary and a secondary—and we have just seen that over the discussion on face masks. I am able to draw upon quite a significant pool of English, maths, science, history, geography teachers who are happy and keen to do catch-up recovery work with students. I can use the premium in that way with teachers who students already have a relationship with. That is how I have chosen to do it.

It is a complex thing to get right because you have to make sure that the students that require the catch-up are the students that are attending the catch-up session. There is an awful lot of work to be done with parents and families to make sure that the students who need to catch up are attending, because, of course, it is not a blanket thing. It is not the case that every single child that has come through the pandemic needs to



catch up. Some have worked incredibly hard on the online curriculum and some, dare I say, even flourished.

Identifying and doing the appropriate assessments in class with the students to identify who needs to catch up, and where they need to catch up, is a very important piece of work. The funding has been very welcome, and we have used it very effectively here in the way that I have just articulated.

Q91 Dr Caroline Johnson: How do you assess children in terms of their lost learning? We have heard from other sessions that the reasons some children have fallen behind are not necessarily related to disadvantage; it can be related to all sorts of other different factors. To what extent do you have to design your own assessments for it and what work burden might that place upon you? With the SATs returning—I appreciate that there might be mixed feelings about the SATs—to what extent do they offer you an ability to say this is where the primary and secondary school children are up to now? Parents seem quite worried about how much their child has lost, because very often a parent will not know where they are supposed to be up to at that particular age. How can you reassure parents about the progress of their individual child?

Andy Green: You asked about primary schools, but is that aimed at me? I am very happy to tell you what we do.

Dr Caroline Johnson: It is for both. I am wondering about the workload in terms of these assessments and whether the SATs will help with that by providing an assessment.

Andy Green: I will let my primary colleagues comment on that.

Nicola Shipman: In terms of assessments, it is important that, regardless of Covid, we have carried on with our teacher judgments and our day-to-day assessments of children in every lesson, at key milestones during the year. We have carried on during the time with tests, so Rising Stars or PiRA or PUMA. They have given us some standardised scores so that is not any different.

In the school I am in today, they are doing pupil progress review meetings. They are still looking at the end of term data. Teachers are assessing the children in terms of how on track they are to where we anticipate they should be at the end of each academic year, so we can share those measures with parents. I am not sure that SATs—and we might come on to this later—are going to give us a true reflection of where children's attainment is.

I would like to think that over the last two years we have moderated the teacher assessments. We have moderated across the trust; we have moderated with schools outside of the trust as well for that judgment. We have moderators within our schools as well. We feel quite confident that we are able to give an accurate assessment of where children are. We



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have identified gaps in knowledge but what I would also say is, first and foremost, that social, emotional, wellbeing to be able to access the learning for us is probably our biggest challenge as well as attendance. Pupils need to be physically in school to even start to learn. I hope that helps.

Jo Coton: I absolutely concur with what Nicola said. I am an advocate of accountability in some form. I do not think there needs to be league tables, and we have said next year there will not be. Schools do need to be accountable, particularly in areas of disadvantage where we know that children have suffered more impact from the pandemic. We need to ensure that our young people are going out to their secondary schools with literacy and numeracy.

My concern is some of the damage is beyond what the three years of tutoring can remediate, particularly in the early years. There needs to be a longer-term solution for schools to look at that with regards to accountability measures. I know we had a conversation earlier around Ofsted, in terms of making people aware—we were very fortunate—that we were inspected a couple of weeks ago and the HMI did seem very understanding of what we were doing. Where children may have been at a lower level for that particular year group, the conversation was around what we were doing to enable children to catch up.

One thing I want to raise that concerns me is: while I am an advocate of it in terms of abolition of key stage 1 SATs results, in schools where deprivation is high and children come from a lower starting point anyway, the only measure will be key stage 2 attainment. Schools in those areas will miss out on looking at the progress that those children have made from early years to year 6. There needs to be further discussion around how those schools can benefit and not be penalised when their children are maybe just at national average or lower.

Q92 **Chair:** What would you do about the pupil premium because, at the moment, you have a spaghetti junction of funding with the catch-up funding and the different strands that you have? Should it all be consolidated in the pupil premium? Would you ring fence the pupil premium? What would you do?

John Blaney: I think that is a very important point. Jill has touched on it, as probably everybody has. We have definitely seen that disadvantaged children have been further disadvantaged over the past two years. It will not take any inquiry or any investigation to work that out.

Some of the conditions that are often linked to some of the additional funding that we get in schools can be unnecessary. We have had a top up when it comes to some of the students. I do think if we ring fence, it should target things like reading. For all sorts of reasons, many of our pupil premium children will not read at home. The only exposure they get to reading is when they are with us in school. I do think a consolidation of



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that fund for our pupil premium children will benefit schools like ours across the trust where we have high levels of pupil premium children. We have all seen that gap widen—I am sure colleagues will concur—as a result of that lost face-to-face education.

All of the efforts we have taken in our schools—Ruth has mentioned about going out to tower blocks and knocking on doors to make sure children were engaging—we have done for our hard-to-reach children. Very often those are the pupil premium children who have not always been as engaged in the online learning as many others. Another colleague has said that some people have flourished while learning online. That is something that we do need to be conscious of.

Chair: Anyone else briefly? I will bring in Ian.

- Q93 **Ian Mearns:** John, I very much concur with your view that the evidence might be self-evident to those of you working in the field. However, from our perspective as the Education Select Committee, the problem is: is the evidence being gathered and collated to make sure that that evidence is then presented to the DfE so that we can then hold the DfE to account about that? If that evidence is not being collected and collated in an appropriate manner, what we might be told in 18 months' time is that the evidence does not exist.

John Blaney: We are certainly doing it in our schools. We did not want the children to come back and face weeks and weeks of tests to see how much they had missed out on, so we wanted to make sure that we were focusing on face-to-face teaching, getting them back engaging with their learning. Across all of our schools we have done baseline tests. The evidence is there to show that there are real gaps and the disparity between the disadvantaged and other groups in schools.

- Q94 **Ian Mearns:** To your knowledge, is that evidence from your schools being systematically collected anywhere else at a higher level?

John Blaney: Not to my knowledge.

Ian Mearns: That is the problem that we might have in terms of putting this back to the Minister subsequently.

Chair: Ruth and Orienne, you both have your hands up.

Orienne Langley-Sadler: Thank you. To go back to colleagues' questions around assessment, I would concur with what Nicola and John and everyone else has said in terms of the rigour around curriculum assessment. However, for us, another assessment tool is the educational healthcare plan. That is very much wider than just curriculum progression. What we are seeing—certainly within my school—is that the groups are growing around speech, language therapy and communication and other therapies such as physiotherapy and their engagement within school as well. Colleagues mentioned attendance and pastoral intervention.



As much as the funding is valuable and appreciated, one of the complications around the catch-up is the complication around getting that funding. It would be easier for it to go directly to schools. Also, there are limits on funding and, from my perspective, we would prefer to direct some of that funding to a wider curriculum for our young people where we are seeing gaps. That is what I wanted to add on top of what other colleagues had said around curriculum progress.

Ruth Holden: We found the National Tutoring Programme very variable and quite inconsistent. Sometimes people were very good in terms of their specialism, but they were not necessarily very good with children, particularly children who need a particular style of engagement because they are not very able or had connectivity issues or a whole host of things to do with deprivation.

I would welcome it if the funding came through the pupil premium route. I have a whole list of things that I wrote at the weekend for a question that might come up about what schools need now. It was just a bureaucratic nightmare filling in everything that we had to in advance with the National Tutoring Programme, to the point where I had deputies coming to me saying, "I just don't have the capacity to do this. It's driving me mad."

Q95 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I am glad you said that, Ruth. That was the next thing I was going to come on to about the National Tutoring Programme: what people's experience of it has been and how simple it has been—clearly not so much in your case—or if there is anybody else who has not taken advantage of the National Tutoring Programme and why that is? Have you had a similar experience or has one of you had a positive experience of it? I can see some hands up. Andy, did you want to come back on that?

Andy Green: Brendan, if you do not mind, I wanted to make a comment in reference to Robert's question about whether the catch-up funding should be ring-fenced around the pupil premium, if you are happy for me to mention that? If not, I will put it on hold.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: Yes, sure.

Andy Green: I agree with everything that colleagues have said, and I certainly agree with what John said in that disadvantaged students have become more disadvantaged by the whole Covid experience. There is no doubt about that. In answer to Robert's question, here when you look over the years, the spread of the Progress 8 schools for the students who would be classified as disadvantaged is not an exact science and some of them do very well.

For any catch-up funding, we would welcome the opportunity for it not to be restricted solely to pupil premium students but to be able to be used for all students who may require some support in order to catch up, some



of which will fall outside of the pupil premium criteria and heading. For us that would be a very important thing.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: Thank you. Jo, you wanted to comment as well.

Jo Coton: Yes. We obviously appreciate the funding. We have not used the National Tutoring Programme and gone outside because, purely, we felt that at primary level there needed to be some form of established relationship with the young people first. Colleagues alluded to it earlier as well.

Some of the tutors perhaps have gone from agencies and, in my experience, they tend to be not the most effective teachers. Someone else alluded to it as well. At primary level at least, some of them do not have the recent training to be as effective in implementing the catch-ups, particularly with early reading and those kinds of things. Finding that in-house has been quite tricky, because we are deploying people and we are paying people additionally, so we have had to think quite carefully about how we have done that.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: Nicola, I can see you nodding to that.

Nicola Shipman: I was going to add that for us I would concur with what Jo has said. Relationships are absolutely key. Because some of our children—pupils who we serve—have difficult relationships and have struggled to come back into school, it is no surprise that in those schools that have not engaged with the NTP and have trained their own staff to be able to deliver mentoring and tutoring programmes, the children have made better progress because they have a better relationship with the person.

We also found the quality variable for the schools that did use in the first instance the NTP. Also, the portal was very difficult. Ruth, you mentioned about senior leaders having to struggle to log things. It is easier with people you know to pay them the money to deliver what they know the children need.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: Thank you. Does anybody else have anything to say about the National Tutoring Programme?

Ian Mearns: Jill waved her hand a couple of times. I think she has gone.

Chair: Have you finished?

Brendan Clarke-Smith: Yes, we can move on.

Chair: Jill, you are back. Sorry, you vanished from our screen. Do you want to give us a comment?

Q96 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** We were discussing the National Tutoring Programme and what your experience of that was, or any weaknesses or improvements.



Jill Thompson: Yes, we did use the National Tutoring Programme, but we delayed it until we found some staff through agencies that we thought were strong. It has had an impact. We focused on phonics with our younger children and our year 3s, who have missed significant time as well. Therefore, it did have an impact. What we found challenging about it, though, is the very tight guidelines about how much you could use, what you could use it for and the number of children. If we had been able to have that money straight into schools to employ somebody ourselves, we could have impacted a lot more children.

At our primary school the amount that we got meant that we could not sustain that for a long period. We were getting progress, but it has stopped now. It would be very helpful to, yes, bring that as part of the pupil premium. I do take the point that it is not just the pupil premium children who need that support. The money needs to go directly to schools. Yes, hold us accountable as to what we use it for but, if it went straight to primary schools, we could get the staff and we could access all of the children that we need to. I feel that we did not cover as many children as we could have if we had had the money ourselves to use in the way that we would have liked to do.

Chair: Thank you. We are going to move on to the next session and pass on to my colleague Tom.

Q97 **Tom Hunt:** Just quickly before I go into the bulk of the questions, it is about the issue of teachers wearing masks. I am slightly confused by this because surely it is quite easy to ensure very significant distancing when you are in front of a class teaching. I would have thought so. Is that not possible? How is that not possible?

Jill Thompson: It is not possible at all.

John Blaney: Not at all.

Nicola Shipman: Not with nursery and reception children. They want to hug you all the time and be close to you. Not at all.

Tom Hunt: What about secondary schools?

John Blaney: No, absolutely not.

Tom Hunt: I do not understand.

John Blaney: The myth that we stand in front of the classroom to teach is a myth. Yes, we do some direction from the front of the classroom but most of our time is spent walking around classrooms, engaging with children, checking that they understand the work that has been set and checking that they are able to follow the tasks in their books. It is impossible to do that checking from the front of the classroom.

Q98 **Tom Hunt:** Surely, when you are doing that and you are walking up close to them, you can put your mask on at that point and then take it off



when you are standing in front of the class.

John Blaney: Which is what many colleagues do. If we go back to the wearing of masks, the vast majority of colleagues in our schools do wear masks in the classroom, but they do exactly that: they take them off in order to communicate, in order to do the explanations. One of my colleagues says that facial expressions and engagement is important.

Q99 **Tom Hunt:** I do think the devil is in the detail here, Chair. That is an important point that I was not aware of. When we say that 90% of teachers are wearing masks, what we mean by that is they put it on if they are getting close to pupils or students in the classroom, but usually when they are at the front of the class and there is a decent distance and they are communicating, at that point they take the mask off.

John Blaney: Very often, yes, the majority will, yes.

Jill Thompson: Can I add that our classrooms—yes, we are primary, but I imagine it is the case with a lot of older buildings—are not big enough to have distance. You cannot physically get a one-metre distance between the children and the teacher at the front because the classrooms are not large enough. If you have a class of 30 children, in our classes you physically cannot do it. I would imagine that there are a significant number of classrooms that would be the same.

Q100 **Tom Hunt:** Moving on from that topic. Going forward, what changes would you recommend to the Government's catch-up programme that would ensure support always reaches the pupils who need it the most?

Chair: In a nutshell for those who want to answer.

Jo Coton: I think that has been covered in terms of allowing schools more freedom to do what they need to with the money. It also comes down to a wider conversation that John alluded to earlier. We found it difficult, even though we put some of our own money into securing additional staff. Those staff are not always available or the well-trained staff who we would want to put in front of our most vulnerable children, or even not the most disadvantaged but the children to catch up. At the moment, the quality is not out there in abundance. I am sorry to suggest another problem but that is a difficulty for us at the moment. Certainly, more flexibility around the funding and that coming directly to schools in some format.

Tom Hunt: Orienne, you had your hand up.

Orienne Langley-Sadler: Yes, I want to concur with what Jo said. The money coming directly into school would alleviate a lot of bureaucracy and we would then be able to direct and target appropriately, so I concur with what Jo is saying.

Tom Hunt: Would you like to come in, Jill?

Jill Thompson: Yes, please. Yes, going direct to schools would be good.



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Also looking at a longer-term plan so that you can plan more strategically for the years ahead, because if you are working with funding for a year, it is hard to know what to put in place if it is not going to be there the following year.

The other thing I would say is that we need to look broader. Yes, we need to look at schools, but we need to look at the provision outside as well. We have mentioned mental health and the support for children's wellbeing. We find that when we need to refer children on, the services that we are referring to are incredibly stressed and they have to wait 18 months—sometimes three years for some of them—before they get that support. That is too long for a child who is in crisis.

Similarly, when we have children coming into nursery and reception who have missed a huge amount of that socialisation time, something that we need to be honest about is that it is not going to go away in a year. The children who have been born in the pandemic will come through in the next few years and they may have had two years of very little socialisation. We need to look at those young children and see what we can do to help those who are not in school yet, so that they have a good start when they come in.

Nicola Shipman: I would echo that. I would also like to see funding based on locality and place. Our nine schools serve quite different contexts of Sheffield, with 70%-plus deprivation down to 15%-plus deprivation. Local leaders make decisions about what is right under the trust umbrella, but I would also like to see services come into schools such as those that Jo mentioned. Things like CAMHS or With Me In Mind, Trauma Informed, Thrive, whatever it might be, some of those social and emotional services, SALTs, speech and language therapists. Up until recently they were not coming into schools. The only experience those children had, who had no or limited language, was our own school-based staff.

Having the funding ourselves to be able to train the staff—which we have done—to deliver the programmes that are needed would alleviate some of the challenges on other services. You are right that we have children on a waiting list. It is not going to happen for three years, so they will have left our schools by then and we will not be able to provide what they need. I would also like to see a real focus on early years and SEND. I recognise that the gap for SEND children has also widened as much as it has for our disadvantaged pupils.

Q101 **Tom Hunt:** On that point, we have heard from the National Tutoring Programme—we have had sessions with Ministers and so on—and have been assured that there is adequate specialist knowledge and support through that programme. There are individuals who have a sufficient level of understanding of special educational needs to be able to provide very good support. From your experience, has that been the case?

Nicola Shipman: No. Short and sweet. No, not at all.



Q102 **Tom Hunt:** Orienne, as somebody who has huge knowledge in this area, would you said that you are dissatisfied or satisfied with the National Tutoring Programme in relation to SEND support?

Orienne Langley-Sadler: Dissatisfied with that. There isn't a pool of experts. The experts are in schools currently, and there is no pool of experts sat out there waiting for us to redirect them to gaps within our children's learning. The expertise is within the school. We have heard today that that is very stretched due to still the disruption of Covid. I would totally not concur that there is a bank of specialists who have that level of understanding for special needs children and what they require.

Q103 **Tom Hunt:** It is very good to hear that because it is only by having conversations with you that we get to understand what things are actually like.

Moving on to a different question, to what extent do you think that any education recovery programme should focus on factors other than academic catch-up, such as pupils' mental health and overall wellbeing?

Chair: One of you mentioned mental health at the beginning. It would be interesting to understand what should be done about it.

Jill Thompson: Yes, this is something that we are passionate about in school. We have seen a significant rise in the number of children who need support. We are very lucky as a primary school to have a pastoral team. A lot of schools cannot budget for that. We have seen a huge increase in the number of children who need to be referred on to CAMHS, to CYPS. We have 360 children in our school, and we currently have 32 families who are getting more formal support from us. That does not include the support that we have from our pastoral team where they do nurture sessions, one-to-ones and drop-ins. My pastoral team is swamped; they are absolutely swamped. They have a huge amount that they are doing.

We are also bringing in workshops from the Children's Society about mental health and wellbeing. There is a huge amount coming in and any support with that would be very beneficial. That to me is the fundamental thing that we have to get right. Children are not going to be able to learn if they do not have the building blocks, the emotional resilience and do not feel comfortable and safe. Their learning is not going to happen if they do not have that right. What the other colleagues were saying there is absolutely right. The funding needs to come to schools because we know our children best. We know what our children and families need. It is not just about children; it is about supporting the families. What my school needs could be very different to somebody a mile down the road, let alone around the country.

We need to trust schools. Absolutely hold us accountable as to what we do with the money, but there needs to be trust that schools have the experts because we know our children. Bringing in tutors and teachers



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who do not know our children or our context is not going to have the same impact as investing in the staff who are the experts in our schools. Therefore, yes, we need to look now at wellbeing and mental health and how we can support schools perhaps through counsellors in schools, which I know some schools budget for. Budgets are very tight if we can look at what we can do in schools. But not just counsellors as well. Counselling is a very specific thing. We would need to be looking at how we can support schools with mental health support for the children and the families as well.

Tom Hunt: Thank you, Jill. Andy.

Andy Green: Thanks, Tom. You obviously know the school pretty well. Fortunately, about three or four years ago, way before the pandemic, we invested money in a mental health nurse, who works in the school. I am very glad that we did because she is absolutely swamped seeing people and she does a fantastic job.

Of course, our mental health nurse cannot see everybody, but there are multi-agency support mechanisms out there that you can signpost children to. Our mental health nurse had a phone call with one such agency very recently. However, some of these agencies have up to a 54-week waiting list. Therefore, if we did not have the ability to tap into what we have in-house and what we have decided to use our budget for, it would be difficult and tricky. Although, I absolutely agree with the previous point about budgets being very tight and getting increasingly tighter, especially with the amount of money that has to be spent on agency and supply staff and things like that.

There has definitely been, as we have discussed previously, a significant increase in mental health and wellbeing issues as a result of the pandemic. As well as supporting schools with academic catch-up, some funding to support schools for training their own staff—and if necessary buying in consultancy or consultants or whatever they want to buy in, specialist staff to support this—is very important.

Therefore, I would say, yes, it is massively important. The waiting lists for things like emotional wellbeing hubs, through no fault of their own, are so long that, if the child has a significant need that needs to be dealt with there and then, a 54-week waiting list is not what you want to hear.

Tom Hunt: I am going to look to the Chair for some guidance here because we have lots of people who would like to make points, but we still have quite a few questions we have to get through today.

Q104 **Chair:** Jo, have you seen the mental health problems of your children rising? If you had a magic wand, what is the answer to this?

Jo Coton: Funding for the community. We are talking about immediate things at the moment. Like many colleagues, we invest in Place2Be, which is a mental health service, and we have done that for many years.



They train their consultants on site so we are able to give wider support to families or to parents who are also suffering who cannot get immediate help through their local GP, for obvious reasons.

Again, it comes down to the schools utilising funding sensibly. We are focusing now and on the future. Across our five schools in Harlow, we have just opened a nought-to-three stay and play so that we can get in the pre-schoolers who have been forgotten about, which gets the parents early. One of our schools in Harlow has one each day and will be the local hub for that because, like it or not, we are going to have these children and have the problems and the early identification earlier.

For us, it is at primary that this needs to happen, this needs early identification so that the secondaries are not then overwhelmed with what they are getting. In primary schools, at the moment, it can sometimes be contained or controlled in a more effective way. When children hit puberty it is exacerbated, so early identification and solution-based problem solving at primary level is key to assisting our colleagues in secondary schools.

Q105 **Chair:** Is it all your views—if you could just nod—that mental health problems among young children and pupils are significantly on the rise and will be a significant problem in the future, and that this is predominantly caused by lockdowns and kids not being at school?

All witnesses indicated assent.

Chair: You are all in agreement.

Jo Coton: The trend nationally was rising before the pandemic and the pandemic has just embedded that further.

Q106 **Chair:** Thank you. There is a big debate going on about extending the school day, but that means a lot of different things to different people. To me it does not mean people learning algebra until 8 pm. What it does mean is inviting in civil society, community groups, sporting and drama groups to help provide children with those extra activities that help with what we have just been talking about—mental health as well as educational attainment. I know some of you do this already, but what are your views on the practicality of it and would you support a longer school day on those lines? Who would like to go first?

Nicola Shipman: I am happy to start. I would say that pre-pandemic and currently we are already offering those wider opportunities. We have a range of breakfast clubs, we have lunch clubs, we have after-school clubs, whether they be sporting, art, STEM, happening across the schools. That said, the challenge is staffing them sometimes, because staff are absent or external agencies that we buy in are absent because of current Covid rates.

A challenge would be that it would turn to our premises team. I would say that probably publicly our premises teams have not had the



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recognition that they should have had for making our schools cleaner, safer and open for children in the last two years, but that would extend their day. We have expanded that team to be able to offer that, but we have to think about the ability of our own staff to open the schools, shut the schools and also the ability of our children—certainly our young children as well—to engage in a full day plus more. They are tired. They are very tired. Little people get very tired very quickly. Jo, you were talking about your nought-to-three provision. Our two-year-old provision—our little ones—is regularly falling asleep because they do not have the resilience and the ability to last half a day, never mind a full day or beyond. The engagement might be a challenge.

John Blaney: Yes, likewise. This idea that teachers suddenly stop at 3 pm and go home to spend the rest of the day—in all of our schools across the trust, as I am sure colleagues will agree, lots of that afterschool activity takes place in STEM. For example, in Harlow that is 3 pm to 4 pm. That is when teachers are doing lots of their additional PSHE courses, preparing applications for college and uni. There are lots of after-school activities as well.

My concern is to suddenly say to teachers that we are going to extend their full day—lots of it is voluntary and teachers will give that additional time after the school day, and you wonder: when are they going to plan and when do they do their marking of assessments? We would have to be very careful about how that is managed because we know that there is already a shortage of teachers. I worry that, if we add additional pressures, additional time for staff, we will turn people away who might be interested in teaching and that will impact on the staff that we currently have. They are currently under a lot of pressure as well. Therefore, it would have to be carefully managed, recognising that lots of that does happen but on a voluntary basis.

Ruth Holden: Yes, it has been a bit frustrating hearing some headlines in the press, when it is almost like a new thing that schools might extend their school day. It is a bit frustrating when you are on the ground hearing that, because we always did that.

We have found that staff in schools have been very resilient during this pandemic, but it has been quite difficult to get external groups back in. We have not had a problem getting staff to run things that are extra, and we have some money to pay them. We are running Saturday morning school, we are running February half-term school, October half-term school. We are filling all of the time that we can. I can get staff at the schools and pay them, but what we have found difficult is getting some of those external agencies back up and running, because the pandemic has hit them financially if they have staff who are sick, or they are reluctant to come into a school environment with 2,000 students.

What we decided all the way through the pandemic was that mental health was very much linked to physical exercise and enrichment. We



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shuffled our budget to make sure that students were going out all the time and that we ran Duke of Edinburgh-esque activities, even when Duke of Edinburgh had stopped. Interlinking in all of these questions, it would be nice to get the money without complications of the bureaucracy in advance so that we can use it how we know best, because schools are different, schools are very different, inner London or urban areas are very different from some schools in suburbs.

Chair: Jo, were you nodding your head?

Jo Coton: Yes, I don't want to take any more time and I concur with what colleagues said and with what John said. Particularly at primary, listening to Nicola, we need to look at the timings of school days because they vary so much across different schools, trusts and so on. Having a period within the day—and I will throw some times out—between 8 am to 3 pm to focus on education. I am doing this very generally, but our young people have missed wider cultural experiences and enrichment, so we do need that after school—3 pm to 5 pm or whatever that might be. I know lots of secondaries and primaries are doing that anyway, but we cannot do that with just our own staff so it would be appreciated for you to take this back, that we do need the wider civic provision to commission and assist us with this.

We need financial assistance with this, particularly Robert. As you know in Harlow, if we could get the external agencies to run these wonderful things after school that would cost money and our parents cannot afford those kinds of things. Also, that would take additional staff time, add to teacher workload and so on when they are already planning a hugely differentiated curriculum for obvious reasons. We must not forget these wider experiences for young people, because they have missed so many. That is disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children.

Chair: Jill, finally. Then we will move to the final section with Ian on exams.

Jill Thompson: Yes, I agree with a lot of what everyone said, so I will not repeat it. Where it would be helpful to have that focus is the funding for things like the summer programme, summer holiday clubs. We have had holiday clubs from funding from the local authority and it has been about enrichment and wellbeing. They have had incredibly good turnouts because they are free—particularly for the vulnerable children, if you want to try to bridge that gap, it has to be free. If we get coaches into school who charge however much for a football lesson, they cannot do that. We are running as much as we can free.

We have after-school clubs every day after school, but I would worry if it became everyone having to stay in school until this time, because the children are exhausted and, to be blunt, the staff are incredible but they are exhausted after the past two years as well. We would need to look at it very, very closely. I would be very worried if everybody had to stay in school until this time, even if it was for enrichment stuff. Like everyone



else says, let's invest in the provision in the community. Let's bring those into school and use schools as long as we can get support with the premises. Also, summer clubs, because it is the holiday times when a lot of our families struggle without children being in school.

Q107 Chair: Has the summer clubs and the holidays activities programme had a positive outcome on the children in terms of mental health and educational attainment? Have they worked?

Jill Thompson: Absolutely.

Chair: Would all of you say that? Are they working, are they helping the kids? You are all nodding their heads. Thank you. I will pass over to Ian, and we will finish in about 15 minutes.

Q108 Ian Mearns: Thank you very much. We touched on primary assessment earlier. From a formal perspective, the arrangements for primary assessment have been set out for this year by the Standards and Testing Agency. In mind of the discussion that we had earlier on, is there anything that you want to add to our earlier exchanges regarding your view of how fair or appropriate the proposals from the Standards and Testing Agency are for this year? Jill, you have your hand up.

Jill Thompson: I must be honest: I am very worried about giving children, who have not had a normal couple of years, the same tests in the same kinds of situations that children had several years ago. That is very much the picture from what I am hearing from everybody else. We all understand that wellbeing is important and setting the building blocks is right. We want that short-term memory not long term, so not overloading working memory. We know all of that is right for children. However, if you try to box it up, if at the end of the day you have your six SATs that we are going to be held accountable to—they are not league tables but there is going to be pressure—we will feel pressure on heads. That will then put pressure on staff, which will put pressure on children. What you do not want is cramming for a test. You can try every way you can, but there is always going to be that pressure. That is not going to get our children the embedded learning and emotional resilience that is going to give them a good start in secondary school.

Similarly with year 2. With year 2 children, by the end of year 2, two-thirds of their time in school will have been hugely disrupted and now we are doing SATs that judge them in the same way as other children. I know we talked about whether that is a good measure. We do not use assessment at the very end to measure. We are constantly assessing as we go. That is effective because then you can adjust as you go. In the end, an assessment is about holding schools to account. You have to do that but there are other ways to do that. I worry about having these same tests now after the two years that we have had.

Ian Mearns: Thanks, Jill. I noticed Nicola vigorously nodding there. Do you want to come in?



Nicola Shipman: Yes, I would agree. Certainly, with key stage 1 going next year, it would not upset me if it went this year because I am not sure how much that information will give us this year when it is going anyway. I would also agree about the missed learning that children have had. If you think about our current year 3s, they have not had a normal school year. The same for our current year 2s. Yes, hold us accountable, absolutely. I have no problem with that. We have all said in a different question about those accountability measures, but also trust our judgments. That is the message that I would say about teacher moderation.

We assess in every single lesson. We know where our children are, where their gaps are and what we are doing to fill those gaps. I do not need a SATs test to tell me where children are achieving, what they can do and what they cannot do. I worry that the very strong message that we have just shared with you, about the social and emotional wellbeing of pupils, could all come tumbling down like a pack of cards if we sit our 11-year-olds in front of a paper—for however many hours—in May and they come out of their primary education with results that in many respects mean nothing.

Ian Mearns: I saw you nodding as well, Orienne.

Orienne Langley-Sadler: I totally agree. To reiterate what colleagues have said, if we are to put the priority on mental wellbeing, the two things are at odds. As Nicola has said, with the expertise within the school our teachers know where our students are up to. They also know how to balance the mental wellbeing of our young people. As Nicola has said and I agree with, an arbitrary measure will not mean anything. It is totally at odds with what we are trying to achieve in building their mental wellbeing and their belonging to a school community, because that ultimately is what is going to propel them forward.

Q109 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much. That is a good frame. Does anybody else want to add anything to that particular question? No, okay.

For the secondaries, how fair are the adaptations to assessments and grading that Ofqual has made for exams this year? We all know that there is still a lot of negative feedback from parents and children who were affected in the previous couple of years, so that is an important and crucial question. If you could comment on that, and how your students are feeling about the changes that have been made to the grading arrangements.

John Blaney: I do think it is too soon to expect children to go back into normal exams, given that this is still not a normal year. It needs to be recognised that with current year 11s or year 13s, year 11s had a disruptive year 9. They had a disruptive year 10 when they started their GCSE class where they missed out on quite a lot of that learning.



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If you think back to the discussion that we had at the beginning of the session, there is still a high absence—both in terms of pupils and in terms of teachers—so I do not think just to make some of those changes to the exams that have been suggested goes far enough. That is something that needs more consideration, given the circumstances that the year 11s and the year 13s will have found themselves in over the past two or three years.

Ian Mearns: Thanks. Andy, you have your hand up.

Andy Green: I agree with John. They are talking about more of a hybrid approach in providing formula and topics and things like that in advance, so that, if they were to sit exams, students would have some opportunity to prepare. I guess I am slightly torn in that I also do not want students who are in year 13—who previously did not sit any public exams in year 11 either—to then go to university and be faced with a barrage of public exams. That could create issues in itself. Whatever is done has to be fair. As John said, it has to take into account that there have been huge variations across the country in terms of the amount of time different students in different places have been absent from school. Therefore, it has to be fair and equitable and a return to public exams in the normal way this year will not represent equity.

Ian Mearns: Thank you very much. Does anyone else want to add to that?

Ruth Holden: One comment is that we are still waiting to hear what will be in the exams in February. It is quite serious as well. Twenty-five percent of modern language GCSE is a speaking element. We are still to be told whether that would even be included. Teachers are doing it and teaching it in case it comes up. If it is taken out that will be wasted.

Also, I do think that if league tables return this year it will not be fair. It will not be fair for schools to be judged in the same way. Because in schools such as the ones I work in, students are so disadvantaged and have had such a difficult time in lockdown. We have forums that we talk on, and students have had very different experiences depending on their living arrangements. It would not be fair to publish league tables this year or next year. It would be helpful if things could be announced earlier instead of spending half a year on maths A-level where content might be reduced but we are not told yet. We are not quite sure why that has happened.

Ian Mearns: Yes, understandable.

Q110 **Chair:** To come in, is it your view that with the caveats that you have mentioned exams should still take place and not go back to the assessment that we have had in the last two years?

Ruth Holden: Yes, it would be good to have some sort of exams for some of the reasons that John and Andy have stated. The students are



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very stressed, and they want to do exams. They are fed up with finding out that things will not be normal. It would be useful to have exams, but it would have been useful to know in September not necessarily a content list of what is going to come up in an exam but at least some idea of which sections of the exam will not be necessary.

Chair: Thank you. John, briefly.

John Blaney: I completely agree. Yes, children do want to sit exams and we are preparing the children for them. It needs careful consideration to take into account the amount of education that the children have lost. I don't see that that is the case yet, so that would have to be made clear.

Q111 **Chair:** Should there be more assessment of the lost learning of children in exam years across the board and who should be doing that? Should it be you with the local authorities and the Department, so that by then the Department should know how much catch-up is needed?

John Blaney: In schools we are already keeping records and evidence of the work that children are doing, just in case, because we do not know. As colleagues have said, we know where the gaps are with children because of the way that we have assessed them—end-of-unit assessments. As colleagues said, every day we are assessing the children when they are in front of us, so we are best placed to take that into account with the overall judgment.

Chair: Thank you. A final question from Ian.

Q112 **Ian Mearns:** For those of you in the secondary sector with post-16 provision, are you offering BTECs or T-levels? Is that any of you? How well do you understand the adaptations that have been made to the vocational and technical courses that your school offers, and do you think these have been clearly articulated by the Department?

Ruth Holden: Yes, I have a UTC in the trust as well as over 1,000 students at sixth form. That has been better than straight A-levels and straight GCSE, mainly because they are sectioned up throughout the year in short exams. We do a lot of BTEC offer, and we are trialling T-level as a small group in a health technical qualification. Therefore, yes, that has been better because it has had to be. Students sat public exams last week in business, IT and health and social care, so in a way with the timing of those there had to be clear guidance, and that was welcome. My issue is more with the extremely high-pressure terminal exam courses, like advanced maths, maths, physics, modern languages, which are challenging at A-level.

Q113 **Ian Mearns:** What you are clearly saying there, Ruth, is that in the current context of what youngsters are going through, the modular approach—where they can bank what they have done—is a better approach?



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Ruth Holden: Yes. Vocational qualifications are staggered throughout the year. You do coursework and you do staggered exams. Vocational courses are tailored for a particular type of student who finds that type of course easier.

It is interesting what colleagues have been saying about mental health. We have brought a counsellor into this school to meet with year 13s who just cannot cope with the fact that they did not sit GCSEs. They do not have experience of public exams. It is like the crunch is coming. If they do not do well in these A-levels, what is their future? For an 18-year-old who is aspiring to leave poverty and get to something better, the pressure is enormous. I am very worried about that. T-levels, vocational qualifications, have been much better, I feel.

Q114 **Ian Mearns:** In a nutshell, with regard to vocational courses, you are working with much more clarity and certainty with regard to the academic courses?

Ruth Holden: yes.

Q115 **Ian Mearns:** Does everybody agree with that? Nodding going around. John?

John Blaney: In our STEM academy we have not introduced them yet, but we can see the benefits. The idea of that blended learning in a classroom and that work experience. We know the value that that has. Given the past two years it has been difficult to move to that, but it is certainly something that we will consider for the future for the children because it is definitely very suitable to some of our learners.

Q116 **Tom Hunt:** A final question from me, going back to some of the questions I asked earlier on about special educational needs and the shortcomings of the current support through the tutoring programme and so on. How could the Government catch-up programme better address the needs for people with special educational needs and disabilities? What specifically could be done and what interventions could be made to address some of the concerns that you have?

Chair: Can I start with you, Orienne, please?

Orienne Langley-Sadler: It is wider than just the educational lens. The Government and Ministers need to look wider than just education to look at how we bring together public sectors in health and social care, because it links everything together. We have talked a lot this morning around mental health. Colleagues have described robust pastoral systems within their schools, and we are no different as a special school. However, there is only so much that a school is in control of. Until we pull together all of the services that surround these individuals that conundrum of how we evoke change for our special educational needs students and for our disadvantaged will continue to keep rolling.



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I would urge Ministers to look beyond the silos of the individual Departments—in terms of the Department for Education and so on—and try to look at more of a tripartite funding and policy making. Certainly, as a special educational needs school, we see it very vividly within our schools. Each section of public life is sectioned off differently. However, it is the same end user and there has to be greater discussion against all sections to try to evoke that change.

Chair: Thank you. One final comment, Nicola.

Nicola Shipman: Back in the day, a number of our schools had children's centres. I am not advocating that we necessarily go back to something like that, but perhaps the bringing together of multiple agencies within the heart of the school because, invariably, we find that the school is in the heart of the community. We are the ones that see the children for the longest amount of time. Having the ability to bring health, social care and specialist services either under one roof or close to schools under one roof could be a very positive move forward and would address local context, local community issues. We are trying to bring more of them together to support our schools.

Chair: Thank you very much, all of you. It is appreciated and invaluable evidence. Thank you for your time. To reiterate, thank you for all that you and your staff do to keep our children learning at this time. I know it is incredibly difficult at the moment. We will be using your evidence in a report that we are doing on the catch-up programme and related issues. Very good luck. Jo, thank you for the visit you hosted last week as well in Harlow. Goodbye everybody, and thank you again.