

Education Committee

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

Tuesday 12 May 2020

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Apsana Begum; Dawn Butler; Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; David Simmonds.

Questions 136 - 205

Witnesses

I: Jenny Coles, President, Association of Directors of Children's Services; and Javed Khan, Chief Executive Officer, Barnardo's.

II: Emily Konstantas, Chief Executive, Safeguarding Alliance; and Paul Whiteman, General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jenny Coles and Javed Khan.

Q136 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Thank you to our witnesses and my colleagues for being so incredibly patient and kind. There have been a few technical difficulties today, but thank you for coming. For the benefit of those watching on Parliament TV and the transcribers, would the two witnesses introduce themselves briefly and state what their organisations do?

Javed Khan: My name is Javed Khan. I am chief executive of Barnardo's, which is the UK's largest children's charity.

Jenny Coles: I am Jenny Coles, president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

Q137 **Chair:** Thank you. Could you give a state of play of what you think is happening to vulnerable children in the lockdown? We know that very close to 90% of vulnerable children are not getting any kind of education, according to the Government's statistics. What is the impact on those children, and who do you see as the most disadvantaged and vulnerable?

Javed Khan: At Barnardo's we are seeing an enormous impact on vulnerable children. They are the only children that Barnardo's stands to support. We would argue further and say there is a risk of potentially losing a whole generation because of the impact of what is going on at the moment. I am talking specifically about the vulnerable. Of course, in times like this it is the vulnerable who suffer most and we are seeing that exhibited in a whole range of ways.

We are worried about what is going on now, which is the increase in poverty for a whole range of reasons, and the increase in mental health challenges that the vulnerable are suffering and not getting support for. We are also worrying about the medium and long-term impact. When we come out the other side of this, we are going to see these challenges exacerbated in a whole range of ways. We are worried that the systems in place will not have the resources or the wherewithal to respond effectively. We are also really worried about the inequality of what is going on.

I would argue that the virus does discriminate in a whole range of ways. Far from being a great leveller, I think it is hitting the most vulnerable the hardest. The death rate is twice as high in deprived areas, and all the research is showing that. BAME people are more likely to become seriously ill and less likely to survive it. The impact of the lockdown is having a greater effect on the poor and the most vulnerable families. Many families that we work with—and there are many others that we have not been able to reach—I would argue are experiencing poverty, abuse, mental health issues for the first time in their lives, and yet it is extremely difficult to be able to provide the support for them.



Jenny Coles: I would certainly agree about households and families that were already facing challenges. These have been amplified during this current crisis, particularly if you are living in overcrowded conditions, if you have challenges around your finances and, of course, the real worry about whether or not you will have employment as we move through this. The long-term impact on children will only be seen over time in their educational outcomes and emotional and mental health.

However, what I also have to say is that, anecdotally, we have had information, particularly around looked-after children, where they have begun to thrive in an environment where they do not have the pressures of going to school all the time. I am not saying that is something that should happen even in the short or medium term, but there have been reports, particularly for children who are in foster care, that they are thriving and that they have been able to cope. As I say, the long-term impact on children will only come out as we begin to see restrictions lift and we can reach more children.

Q138 **Chair:** Have either of you done any specific surveys on vulnerable children, how many there are, what is happening to them and whether or not they are being educated?

Jenny Coles: We are just about to do that. I know local authorities are now beginning to do those surveys. At the end of April about 14% of vulnerable children were attending school nationally, but in many local areas that is 25% or even increasing. We are seeing an increasing number of children going back into school. As restrictions lift, it has been a real challenge for families who have challenges with their parenting and so they have accepted the message of "stay at home and stay safe" but, as we see restrictions lift, we are definitely seeing more children go back into school.

Javed Khan: We recently did a survey of about 1,000 of our frontline practitioners and we asked them, "How is it looking on the ground?" We found that 76% of them are supporting families affected by school closures at the moment in a whole range of ways; 38% are supporting families where children can still attend school but are choosing not to; and 48% are reporting young people or families that they have safeguarding concerns about and who are refusing contact due to self-isolation.

The challenges are broad and different in different settings. We know that the Department for Education was hoping that about 20% of young people would continue to attend school. These would be the vulnerable, those who have social workers, those who have education, health and care plans and the children of key workers. It has turned out to be only about 2% of children still attending, and only 5% of those who are designated as vulnerable. There is a whole swathe of young people we know are out there who are either choosing not to go to school, their parents are not sending them to school or, at worst, are going missing on the way from home to school.



Q139 **Chair:** Other organisations have said things similar. What is the way we can help these children, both now and in the aftermath?

Jenny Coles: I think it is by their return to school but in a phased and supported way. School leaders and schools know their children and they know their families, and they have been keeping contact with them. It needs to be done in a measured and very planned way, and that is going to be taken over a period of time. That is the first thing. Local authorities rapidly changed what they were doing when restrictions were put in place. They have a whole variety of ways for making contact with families very regularly, those that they know, such as using WhatsApp, virtual ways, examples of children showing social workers round their homes, as well as face-to-face contact using social distancing in gardens and so forth.

There is a whole variety of ways that services are carrying on. What concerns ADCS the most, though, is the preventative services that are in place so that families can easily access them when they have challenges. These have been restricted, particularly—as I know Javed was saying—for charities, so we are really worried about the sustainability of those.

Q140 **Chair:** There are suggestions that have been mooted in public, and I have done some of this. There are a lot of organisations, like the EPI, the Children's Commissioner and others that have suggested a catch-up premium—they may have a different term for it—and perhaps extra mentoring, pastoral care and tuition done by retired teachers, graduates or Ofsted inspectors. What do you think of those thoughts for helping vulnerable pupils?

Jenny Coles: Certainly, this period out of school will not have helped those pupils who were disadvantaged and disaffected before all this happened. They will need extra help and extra focus as our priority pupils as we have a gradual, phased return to school. The extra resources that schools have need to be led by schools. They know their pupils and what they need. There is a variety of support services from across all agencies—the local authority support services but also mental health services—which will be needed as we move forward and we can assess what trauma and anxieties pupils have when they return to school.

Javed Khan: I think there is some fantastic practice going on out there, as Jenny says. Schools are working really hard to stay in touch, one way or another, with the identified vulnerable—those who are on the social care registers already—whether they attend school or not. Local authorities are working with head teachers. I saw a fantastic practice of that in Birmingham the other day, where head teachers are working with the local authority and the voluntary sector to prepare for the return to school phase.

The challenge I would ask you to think about is not only those who are on the registers as being recognised as vulnerable. I would argue that there are millions of other children out there who, pre-Covid, were not known



to the system. They are not the recognised vulnerable that the Government are regularly talking about. These are the hidden children who, as a result of Covid, have now been driven into poverty, with the impact of the isolation they are living with and the mental health issues they are now facing that they weren't before. They are on the edge of becoming one of those statistics, but they are not being contacted at the moment because they were not on the system of the registers before this all began.

We do not know how many of them are out there, but they are the people that Barnardo's and others like us are trying very hard to reach and give a lifeline to. The worry is that when we come out of lockdown, when schools open again, gradually and then fully, I believe there is going to be a huge spike in demand from those young people who are currently not being recognised.

Q141 Chair: In a nutshell, what is the answer? What would you suggest, Javed?

Javed Khan: Your first question was about an increase in funding. Schools are desperately going to need an increase in funding, whether it is through the pupil premium, the catch-up or whatever you call it. Let's be careful about what that money is going to be used for, because catch-up gives the suggestion that this will be about helping young people catch up with their education and there is an academic flavour to that. That is going to be needed, but there will be many other young people who will need a different kind of support, whether it is intensive pastoral or therapeutic support, intervening as quickly as possible to provide them with a whole wraparound service to stop them going into care and to stop them becoming one of the CAMHS statistics.

The answer to that is that schools alone will not be able to do it; local authorities alone will not be able to do it. We really need an interdependent strategy that brings in the charity sector as well, because often we provide the glue that holds communities together at really difficult times. We are trusted by many of the families.

Q142 David Simmonds: Good morning to both witnesses. I have two connected questions for both of you. What more do you think schools could be doing in the current climate to support vulnerable children, particularly given that schools are largely empty? You have fully staffed schools and, therefore, they have more capacity, potentially, to be supporting, in particular, the work of local authority outreach teams.

Perhaps this one is more aimed at Jenny: in your view, what additional powers will local authorities need to respond even more effectively to some aspects of this? I am thinking in particular of the ability to track down some of those vulnerable children to make sure they are getting access to what they need and to make sure that schools are held to account for providing that.



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Javed Khan: I will pick up first on schools and what more they could be doing now, on top of the challenges they are already facing. As the lockdown eases gradually, the schools are a great resource for these hidden young people I am talking about who we are in touch with and trying to provide support to digitally using video conference, telephone and so on. They are often the largest safe spaces within a community that are being underutilised at the moment.

Barnardo's and others like us could work with the local schools and use the school building to begin to provide those face-to-face services, using social distancing because the spaces are large, the therapeutic support and the early interventions that I am talking about. Imagine, for example, the young people I was talking about who are not on the registers and yet they have suffered a bereavement during Covid. They need specific support to help them get through that. That is not going to be about academic support. A whole range of counselling and therapy is going to help them get through this. We could be doing that now using the school buildings.

Q143 **Tom Hunt:** Thank you for everything you are doing, Javed. Thank you also for those statistics, the data. There is not a huge amount of data around at the moment, particularly regarding attendance. I am very concerned to hear of that 48% where there are safeguarding issues. I think I am right in understanding that the parents are refusing any kind of contact with social services. That is deeply concerning.

Let's be honest, the reason why some of those children are deemed as being vulnerable because of these safeguarding issues is, frankly, because of their parents and concerns about them. Isn't it strange, therefore, that we have put the ball completely in their court when it comes to their children's attendance at school? Do you think it would have been better if the Government had made it more of a requirement that they attend school, rather than just putting it entirely in their court? Secondly, connected to that, it is interesting to hear that the attendance of vulnerable children was 14% in April, and in some cases got up to 25%. Thank you for that information, Jenny.

Vulnerable is obviously a very broad category but, within that category, do you have any idea of what the attendance is for those children where there are safeguarding issues? It would be interesting to have that particular element.

Chair: Jenny, while you do that, could you also answer David's question? I forgot to bring you in.

Jenny Coles: I will do. I will answer this first. I can give you my local example in Hertfordshire. More children on child protection plans are attending school than any other vulnerable group. About 10 days ago we were at 25%, and we are rising every day and every week in that category.



I think it has been a very difficult message to give because it needed to be really clear that restrictions were in place, “stay home, stay safe”, and parents had taken that on board. More broadly, not just for parents of vulnerable children, getting parental confidence for a phased return to school will need a lot of work by central Government and also local communities and local government. This is not going to be something that will be fixed by 1 June. It is going to take a lot of weeks and a lot of work to do that, so that is a really strong message that our association has been giving.

On local authority powers, we have the flexibilities under the Adoption and Children Act. The association thinks they are more than enough, and we would only use them in emergency situations. In all local authorities at the moment, surprisingly, the children’s services workforce has not been affected as much as we thought it might be. However, as we move forward, our biggest challenges are going to come in the next phase. As Javed has said, we have heard that referrals to children’s services have dropped. They are beginning to rise again now. In many places they dropped over 50% within two weeks, but they are definitely rising again.

The second thing is that supporting vulnerable children and families is a multiagency thing. It has been impacted, particularly by our health colleagues who have obviously been moved on to other duties, but they will begin to come back to their former roles. Schools are doing a lot of online work but are not seeing as many pupils, and they are key safe places. Our police colleagues have managed to keep their workforce, so they have been very much out in the communities and looking for safeguarding issues. I hope that answers your question, David.

Q144 Jonathan Gullis: Thank you to the witnesses for attending today. As of August 2019, we know that half of all local authorities’ children’s services were deemed by Ofsted to be either inadequate or requiring improvement. At present, how well equipped are local authorities to review and assess the circumstances of every family and child they are currently working with? To talk about the financial impacts, we know that in 2016-17 there was an overspend in local authorities by £714 million. What can the Government do to rectify and give support to children in social care in order to make sure we get the best practice?

Jenny Coles: Local authority children’s services budgets were under pressure before this crisis. That certainly has not changed. We were really pleased to get the funding to assist with the crisis but, already, the local authorities are seeing that this is not going to meet all the costs of what they need. ADCS is continually saying that what we want is a three-year funding settlement, certainly across children’s services and across special educational needs and disability. Then we can plan for our future.

In terms of the current crisis, we would say that the impact on children and the pressures that have been building, which we have talked about, will take at least 18 months to two years to work through, potentially.



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Javed Khan: I think local authorities are in a really difficult position at the moment and have been for the last 10 to 12 years, so this is not something new. The money was available to them. I used to run services as a director in local government, and that money has been wrenched out through the age of austerity and that is bound to have an effect and a dramatic effect. Covid is going to make that far more difficult than it has ever been before. That is our greatest fear. I think the worst is yet to come.

If we see an enormous recession, which is what we are expecting, all these trillions of pounds that are being spent at the moment will have to be paid back over a long period of time. The history of our country and its politics show that local government, the local functions that people rely on, will be squeezed, so I see a perfect storm coming out of this the other way.

Local government will not have the money to provide the essential resources and services that the most vulnerable will be relying upon. Often in those circumstances they turn to the charity sector to plug the gap. The charity sector is reliant on donors' income because we fundraise. Donors will feel very insecure about their own sustenance, their own jobs and prospects, and so on, and donating to charity is not going to be their priority. Survival is going to be their No. 1 priority, and then the perfect storm just begins to revolve and the most vulnerable will suffer the most.

One of the ways out of this is that local authorities have an enormous leadership role in their local patch. What we have to move away from is a very traditional style of commissioning services, where a few people in local government—and I used to be one of them, as I say, hands up—identify the problem on their own. Then an even smaller group lock themselves in a room and try to work out what the answer is. Then they bang out a whole load of tenders for people like us to compete with each other to try to see who can deliver.

I believe that whole model is flawed and cannot work in the future with greater limited resources and a huge spike in services. What we need is genuine strategic partnerships, interdependent, working between the state at a local level, a range of providers—including the voluntary sector—right at the start of identifying what the problems are and, therefore, what the solutions could be, a kind of co-production of the problem and the solution and pooling our resources. We will all have resources from a whole range of sources that ultimately will have impact.

Q145 **Jonathan Gullis:** In the place that I represent in Stoke-on-Trent, we have a huge issue with a lack of foster carers. You said that children in foster care are doing much better, but are we going to see an issue in getting more people to step up and help out in that sector? That is a big fear of mine.

We have talked about how we are helping the kids who are at the highest



risk, but does that mean the kids who are lower risk within children's services are therefore being neglected or forgotten, because obviously there has to be a priority?

A final one—sorry, Chair—is that the Coronavirus Act 2020 has allowed the temporary lifting of the statutory duties on local authorities to maintain the provision in education, health and care plans. Was this something that social workers in children's services were calling for themselves, and what impact are these changes having in practice?

Jenny Coles: Foster carers is an important issue to raise. I think it will only be as restrictions lift that we will know about enquiries. We have heard that people are still coming forward to go through the fostering process, which is really encouraging. However, there is a national shortage of foster carers, and we also have foster carers, because of the demography of foster carers, who will be leaving in the next few years, so it is an absolute priority. It would be good to see a national campaign about recruiting foster carers and raising awareness of what a positive experience it is for foster carers as well as children. That would be the first thing, and ADCS would really support that. I think you are very right to be worried about that.

On the second thing about the focus on the high priority, given the situation we are in, local authorities have looked at prioritising the families they are working with. They are still following their statutory duties. All families are being contacted, as far as we are aware, using a variety of means. When I was talking about using a variety of means for contacting and working with families, I was not just talking about those children on child protection plans. There is a whole range of work that local authorities do, including early help work with partners. We have seen a lot of partner work in reaching out to families, particularly those families who have financial challenges. There are many good examples across the country. It has been a big part of our work, and I am sure it will continue because of those financial challenges for the families we were talking about.

I would like to mention—going back to what Javed was saying—that there is a lot of partnership commissioning, and that does not need to stop just because we have had this crisis. That is the way forward, and what we have found is that local authorities have been real leaders of place and have looked at different ways of working in the short space of time, and we hope that would continue.

Javed Khan: Building on what Jenny has just said, there is an enormous risk of those at lowest risk, as you referred to them, being forgotten, the hidden children again. I keep making this point about those who are not on the radar at the moment. If you take something relatively simple like free school meals—which was welcome, a really good initiative that I know had some teething problems, and so on, but it is running—it is only available to those who were on the free school meals register pre-Covid. It does not recognise those who have now been forced into poverty



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during this period. They are not eligible. They are part of those who are forgotten.

Q146 **Chair:** Javed, if I could quote the Education Policy Institute—you probably saw the report last week—which also says what you have said, “The consequences of the pandemic not only mean that we are at risk of not meeting the needs of children who were already vulnerable, but also creating many more newly vulnerable children and putting yet further strain on children’s services. Although the Government has...announced an additional £12 million for vulnerable children, this relatively small intervention, targeted on only a few areas of the country, will not have a systematic or sustained impact on outcomes.” Do you both agree with that or not?

Javed Khan: Yes.

Jenny Coles: Yes.

Q147 **Chair:** In a nutshell, can you say why?

Jenny Coles: These pressures were there for families before this crisis happened, and now so many more families are falling below the level of poverty because of the insecurity of their income.

Javed Khan: I would have said exactly what Jenny has just said.

Chair: Thank you. That was brief, thank you.

Q148 **Ian Mearns:** Good morning, everyone. Do you agree with Anne Longfield, the Children’s Commissioner, that the Government’s recent changes to adoption and coronavirus regulations are unnecessary and lack any real consultation?

Jenny Coles: The flexibility to the Adoption and Children Act came out before the guidance. The guidance came after it and put it in context, so that is the first thing I would say.

The second thing is that it was done at a time when lockdown had just happened. People did not know what was going to happen, particularly around the workforce and children’s services, and in an emergency those sorts of flexibilities may well be required to keep our services running. We have to keep running. We have to keep children in care being looked after and we need to respond to families, but I really want to emphasise that those flexibilities will only be used in an emergency and not frequently, and they will be frequently reviewed. I think it is necessary to have those in the background, but they need to be very carefully monitored, which they will be by the local authorities and, I am sure, by the DfE as well.

Q149 **Ian Mearns:** Jenny, was the ADCS fully consulted on the Government’s coronavirus adoption regulations?

Jenny Coles: We were involved in the early stages, but we were not consulted on the final stages and when it was published.



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Q150 **Ian Mearns:** Are the changes, in practice, being used as a last resort or are they likely to be relied on more widely? How long should the easements last?

Jenny Coles: They are only being used in an emergency. We have heard that from a whole variety of local authorities. Local authorities are determined to fulfil their statutory responsibilities in a variety of ways, and they need to be continually reviewed.

Q151 **Ian Mearns:** Javed, do you have anything to add to that?

Javed Khan: I was pleased that the Children's Commissioner raised this issue as an example of a rare focus and intervention on vulnerable children and young people. We have not been hearing enough about this through the whole of the crisis.

Having said that, though, no agency can continue to operate during this crisis in the way that it operated before. Therefore, I understand some of the logic for the relaxation of some of the regulations. I have been asking the Department for Education to make sure that it puts in place specific monitoring for the impact of this flexibility on the most vulnerable and to make that impact assessment available publicly. I would go further. I think it needs some independent oversight as well, and perhaps a report from your Committee at a future stage.

Q152 **Ian Mearns:** When schools are thinking about preparing to bring youngsters back, of course they will not just be dealing with youngsters who may have regressed from an educational perspective. There will be all sorts of other problems from the lack of social contact that youngsters have had. What should schools and children's services be doing to prepare for an increase in children and young people with mental health needs following the pandemic?

Jenny Coles: I want to emphasise that the lead-in time for any phased return to school needs to be long enough. We would be saying five to six weeks to put exactly what you are saying into place, so a whole range of safety and practical issues but also the support that is wrapped around schools. It is really important that mental health support, counselling support, behaviour support is put in right from the beginning, and then schools will be able to assess and draw on that support being available.

There was an increasing amount of support, particularly mental health support, for young people and those in schools. Of course, some of those resources have had to be taken away because of the Covid situation, so we need to assess whether or not they are in place. We have been talking about the whole range of pressures that young people and families have been facing. We will need to assess that, and there is very likely to be a shortfall as we move forward.

Javed Khan: As a former maths teacher and director of education once upon a time, I understand really well the pressures that schools face and will face when we come out the other side of this, so I completely agree



with Jenny. The focus has to be that, alongside the academic support that young people need, the pastoral care is going to be absolutely critical and the schools alone will not be able to provide that.

The teacher cannot be the teacher, the social worker, the therapist and the counsellor, so we are all going to have to group together. That is going to cost, so I believe some specific resources are going to have to be made available at the local authority level and in the schools' hands. Great schools do this really well already and are preparing for it—and I gave an example earlier—but we have to make it consistent across the piece.

Q153 **Ian Mearns:** Is there anything you think that CAMHS will have to do in preparing for this? Are they geared up? CAMHS is a patchwork quilt. In some areas it is about passable, and in other areas it is not very good at all. Is there anything specific that you think CAMHS should be doing in order to prepare for this?

Javed Khan: I am really worried about CAMHS. I think CAMHS was in crisis before we came into Covid, with some waiting times for first referrals of around nine to 10 months, and over a year in some cases for treatment to begin. Those numbers have been coming down and a great effort has been going on across the country, but that is still completely unacceptable. Put yourself in the shoes of a 13-year-old young girl who has social anxiety, who has been referred and has to wait eight, nine, 10 months before she gets any support and what damage that will do to her and how much worse the situation will get.

My suggestion is based on practice. Barnardo's is running services up and down the country. If you go to Solihull, for example, and visit the Solar service, Barnardo's is running the equivalent of what was called CAMHS before, in partnership with the local NHS. What we have done there is take away the traditional four tiers of CAMHS—tier 1, 2, 3, 4, gradually getting worse, with residential care right at the top end—and investing the bulk of the resource at the earlier stages, so early intervention. It is, at the first signs of challenge, intervening really early with rapid support, rapid referral, multiagency. That has considerably reduced the number of young people who then have to go into tier 3 and tier 4 services. It is a dramatic improvement.

That is possible because the tiers are not a statutory obligation. It is just customary practice that those have been put in place. There are alternative ways of doing this, and that is what I would encourage CAMHS services up and down the country to think about.

Q154 **Chair:** I have a question from Dr Caroline Johnson who has technical difficulties from where she lives. Previously Jenny said that 25% of vulnerable children in Hertfordshire are attending school, although 100% are eligible. I gave a figure of close to 90% across the country. She is asking if that 25% is typical of the UK as a whole. What should be done to increase it, and why is the attendance in school of any vulnerable



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children getting any kind of education at all so low?

Jenny Coles: I would return to the message, the strong message, and the rightful message of “stay at home and stay safe.” We are now moving to a different phase, so a strong national message around vulnerable children attending school would really help social workers in encouraging them. We are seeing an increase every week, and we have had an announcement about schools’ phased returning. All of those things will help. The local workers on the ground give confidence to parents to get their children into school because they have a rightful place. There is a national message as well as a local message that will be really important: it is good for your outcomes and it is safe to do so.

Javed Khan: It is now time for a national campaign, driven by Government, in the way there was a campaign around “stay home, stay safe.” Now the public have to hear the message if we want young people to go to school. We want the teachers to want them at school as well, because we know there is a big backlash from teachers who are saying, “The environment isn’t safe for us.”

There has to be a considered campaign to try to address the issue that Jenny is talking about of the confused messaging that has been in place to date. You cannot blame parents. I would not blame any parent for not sending their child to school at the moment because of this confusion. They do not want to put their child into a high-risk environment, so they would rather keep them at home. To address that, a considered campaign has to be launched across the country to try to change people’s views.

Q155 **Chair:** We also know that, according to the Sutton Trust, nearly two thirds of children are not accessing any online education. That is also a separate problem in itself.

Javed Khan: Yes.

Q156 **Tom Hunt:** This is linked to what I asked earlier. Some pupils could be vulnerable to crime and abuse. Are child protection conferences and multiagency front door assessments still taking place as before, or have they been reduced?

Jenny Coles: All front door referrals to children’s services are open. They are all operating as they were, and we have seen the evidence of increased referrals starting generally across the country now, week by week. Child protection conferences are still operating. They are using a software platform. Also, families still have the opportunity, if they do not have technology, to come into local authority offices using social distancing, not only for that but also, for example, they might be meeting a legal representative.

Q157 **Tom Hunt:** Where teachers or charities are concerned about a pupil who may be deemed vulnerable but without a social worker, how easy is it to get them referred and supported? Talking locally, I know that in Suffolk—



I think since we implemented lockdown—the number of referrals has dropped by a third. This is a serious concern. What are your views on that question?

Jenny Coles: I know local authorities—indeed, my own—have been doing weekly social media campaigns to get information out to the community, “Keep your eyes alert. If you have concerns, please ring this number.” In addition to that, the police have been doing a lot of media things, particularly about domestic abuse and getting that on the community’s radar as well by showing helplines and so on. Safeguarding partnerships, on a multiagency basis, have been putting regular communications out there, and of course the NSPCC is doing its month-long campaign at the moment.

Javed Khan: To your question of how easy is it, it is not easy at all. It is really difficult. I would probably split it into two bands that we are seeing on the ground. Most of our support services have now had to become digital, virtual. That is proving to be working with the vulnerable young people that we already had a relationship with, so the relationship is relatively strong and the alternative way of staying in touch is generally working. It is proving far more difficult with those who are new referrals because that relationship does not exist.

Jenny Coles: Yes, I would agree.

Q158 **Apsana Begum:** I should begin by saying that I was an employee at Barnardo’s before being elected, so I thought I would declare that.

My question is to Jenny. How useful and supportive has it been to have Ofsted inspection teams and departmental officials deployed to those local authority teams most under pressure and in need of support?

Jenny Coles: I know colleagues across the country have taken up that offer, not just in children’s services but in education and early years as well, because there has been a full range. That offer was made really early on, within the first week. Not every local authority has needed to take it up but those that did have found it useful across the whole spectrum of what children’s services do.

Q159 **Apsana Begum:** Javed, do you have any comment from the interactions that you have with local authorities?

Chair: You two must be old friends.

Javed Khan: All the best people once upon a time worked for Barnardo’s, I am told.

Yes, I think this was a necessary action in the current climate. It was exactly the right thing to do, but I hope that pause is not going to last for an extended period because I think the check and balance that Ofsted provides is valuable oversight.

Q160 **Dawn Butler:** Thank you both for your evidence today. You have quite



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clearly outlined that disadvantaged children are more disadvantaged by Covid. You have spoken very clearly about the invisible children or the hidden children who are now vulnerable and disadvantaged. The structural inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid. What needs to happen now, before schools open, to be sure we do not make the situation worse?

Jenny Coles: It will be really important, as schools go back, to consider their local communities because, as you say, some local communities have suffered more than others with death and bereavement during Covid. I know that the DfE is considering that for the guidance it will continually put out. That is very much in the minds of schools and communities in their preparation. Hence, ADCS is clear that schools and local authorities need a five to six-week lead-in to prepare for this because it is really important.

Javed Khan: One of the key commitments that we all have to make is to be brave and bold enough to talk about the discriminatory impact of the virus. There are still too many people out there who are choosing not to talk about this, choosing to ignore some of the statistics out there, and that is an enormous weakness. All agencies are responsible for addressing this, embracing it and recognising that there is a disproportionate impact on BAME communities, and on BAME children and young people who will suffer more. It is not until we accept that that we can start putting together the strategies that have to include the communities themselves. All of the experience shows that, when you really want to get close to the challenges that BAME communities are facing, you have to work within the communities, not do to them but work with them.

Q161 **Dawn Butler:** Working with the communities, the Government have stated that schools will reopen in this phased period. Do you think that it is feasible for schools to reopen without a five to six-week lead-in and without implementing working with the communities before you open the schools?

Jenny Coles: Schools are very connected to their communities, but there is a whole range of things that need to be put in place. This is a really important part of it, and school leaders and school staff have to feel confident in having children back and being able to deal with this. As Javed said, it is important to talk about that. I know that for ADCS colleagues in London, for example, it is very much on their minds and it will take time. It is about time and confidence and talking about it openly, as Javed was saying.

Q162 **Chair:** I understand that schools are not going to be open officially in the summer, and we are going to ask the next panel about this. Should there be summer schools, as in people like Barnardo's and other charities going to help with both the education and the pastoral care? I am very clear about the pastoral care and the wellbeing of pupils, that they could go in and have that catch-up help in whatever way they need it. Is supporting



that worth the Government considering?

Jenny Coles: Yes, I would say it definitely is, because there is a whole range of summer schemes that operate for children during the summer. I am sure that they and their parents must be wondering what is going to happen. Doing the work to enable it, however possible around social distancing and so forth, because they happen anyway over the summer, and over this summer they are probably needed more than ever.

Javed Khan: I completely agree. I think it would be a great move if that could be put in place. Another practical example is the free school meals vouchers. I hope that that can be extended to September and not end at the end of term.

Chair: Thank you both for what you are doing in your work, and Barnardo's as well. I really appreciate your coming today. Please thank all your workers on behalf of the Education Committee, especially at this time. Thank you again for your patience with the technical difficulties, that we started slightly later. I wish you both and your organisations very well. We are going to have to suspend the committee while we have our second panel on. Thank you, both of you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Emily Konstantas and Paul Whiteman.

Q163 **Chair:** Good morning to both of you. Thank you for attending today. For the benefit of the tape and those watching on Parliament TV, can you introduce yourselves and your positions, please?

Paul Whiteman: My name is Paul Whiteman. I am the general secretary of the NAHT, representing school leaders across all sectors.

Emily Konstantas: Hello. My name is Emily Konstantas, CEO of the Safeguarding Alliance. We are committed to raising the standards of safeguarding in schools.

Q164 **Chair:** I should declare that Safeguarding Alliance is partially based in my constituency, as well as London, and I know Emily very well. I just want to get that on record.

I will start off with you, Paul. Is it your view that all schools should be providing some contact to pupils, whether it is online learning, paper homework or phone contact, if possible?

Paul Whiteman: Most schools—in fact, nearly all schools—are. We have been surveying our members over the last couple of days, and we will share some of the statistics that I will talk about today with the Committee, but they are fresh in to me this morning. Some 99.7% of respondents to our survey are providing exactly the type of contact you describe. The small fraction that does not hit 100% are probably doing it through a hub or through a local partnership, where their individual circumstances prevent them from doing it. That is happening. No doubt



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we will get into some of the difficulties preventing that from happening as successfully as we would all like, but it is not for a lack of effort.

Q165 **Chair:** I hugely appreciate the work that schools do. Clearly, the vast majority are doing that.

Teacher Tapp did a survey that came out recently, and it suggests that 25% of teachers contacted no pupils last week. I appreciate that 75% did, but 25% is 25%. Then they looked at year 11 pupils, and 13% of teachers have set no work during school closures and about 17% did initially and have stopped this term. Do you recognise those figures? If so, why is that happening?

Paul Whiteman: The figures talk about individual teachers. The responses that we are getting talk about what overall schools are doing. I cannot account for individual teachers. Perhaps they are not taking part as much as they might otherwise do because of their own domestic circumstances. Only about 70% of the workforce is available to schools right now because of their own shielding requirements and things like that.

What I can tell you from our respondents, though, is that the vast majority of schools are contacting children at least weekly, some even more frequently than that, and they are doing that through a mix of teachers and leaders using contact points such as telephones, online contact and e-mail contact as well. The picture could suggest a lack of contact, but I do not think that is what is happening with overall school contact.

Q166 **Chair:** Another Teacher Tapp survey suggests that the contact between teachers and private school pupils is dramatically greater than that in state schools, and the more disadvantaged a pupil is, the less contact they have with a teacher. Can you give your view about that?

Paul Whiteman: As well as the effort that goes into making the contact, there is the amount of reception to that contact that happens in the home. We are experiencing some difficulty in making contact with some children and some families, and that increases with the more vulnerable groups and the groups that we want to prioritise more. There are a variety of factors at play there. Obviously, there is some difficulty with online contact with those groups that have less access to the internet, for example. We are experiencing that.

One of the points to make is that the way schools have responded in a matter of weeks to changing the way they deliver education completely has been remarkable. Although the statistics are as worrying to school leaders and teachers as they are to everybody else, it is an improving picture. As time goes by, we are improving with every day.

Q167 **Chair:** I completely recognise that. Just to be clear, I have seen in my own constituency the incredible work that many teachers and schools are doing. I am trying to understand the reasons why some are not having



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contact. Do you believe that every school should have some kind of contact regularly with its pupils, whether it is via paper, the internet, telephone or video call, whatever it may be?

Paul Whiteman: All of those things are happening, and even extraordinary home visits are taking place as well to establish contact where it might be difficult. There is no lack of effort in making sure that that takes place. In individual school circumstances, the schools themselves are still best placed to determine exactly how that contact takes place and to identify their own issues and their own solutions. That is what is happening right now. As I say, it is an improving picture.

Q168 **Chair:** Thank you. I will move on to the announcement yesterday about schools partially reopening—primary schools, for year 1, reception and year 6, and possibly secondary schools. What is your view about that, in view of the Government’s new guidance, social distancing and PPE?

Paul Whiteman: The commentary here is very early. We are still getting underneath the guidance that came out last evening. We do not have a full understanding of what the Government will explain about social distancing in schools and the demands that will be made there. These are provisional remarks right now.

I think what characterises our disappointment are the contradictions in advice that has come out right from the start, even when we established the original lists of vulnerable children and key workers. They were difficult to interpret. We have some difficulties with the advice coming through right now.

If I just take one piece as an example, there is a suggestion that classes of 30 should be cut to classes of 15 for reasons of social distancing. If it is social distancing as we currently understand it, our members are telling us that their building sizes, on average, would accommodate classes of only 10 to 12 rather than 15. Straightaway, we are getting into some real difficulties about whether the Government’s ambition can be practically accommodated, let alone all the fears parents have about bringing their children back into school, and the fears of the workforce, too, about their understanding of keeping themselves safe at the same time.

Q169 **Chair:** Do you believe it is right that the schools, you and your members, should partially open the way the Government have described at the beginning of June?

Paul Whiteman: There is not a school leader that I have spoken to who does not want to expand access to schools. The problem is how quickly you expand and the underpinning safety requirements and science for that, which is still very blurred. I was talking to a doctor at the weekend about children spreading the virus to adults. There seems to be a conflict between what is being said in the advice that we have had overnight and medical advice.

Q170 **Chair:** In a nutshell, what would you like to see before your anxieties and



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your members' anxieties are removed about partially opening primary schools on 1 June?

Paul Whiteman: I think it is an open conversation about the art of the possible and establishing exactly what the underpinning science says, what the medical advice is and then what we can actually do, according to that.

Q171 **Chair:** Going back to my earlier question, the Sutton Trust suggested that only 45% of students had communicated with their teachers during lockdown, and only 8% of pupils in the least advantaged state schools have been returning work set by their teachers. Do you recognise those figures and, if you do, what does this tell us about the scale of the problem?

Paul Whiteman: The figures that we have had back in the last couple of days suggest higher levels of contact than that, and I will furnish the Committee with the full set of figures when we have them.

The thing we are struggling with most is the new relationship between school and home, and the amount of work that takes place in the home. One of the things we have picked up recently is parents' renewed understanding of just how difficult the profession is and how difficult it is to teach children and get children to engage in the work that is being set. There is no shortage of work being set, there is no shortage of online availability, but getting engagement is the task that we need to improve upon. Remember, this is a completely different discipline to teaching in the classroom. It is a whole order of new complexity. In some respects, those figures are quite encouraging that it is that high within a few weeks of starting, and hopefully improving.

Chair: As I reiterate, we recognise the incredible work that many teachers across the country have done, and support staff, of course. Before I bring my question to Emily, I think David Simmonds and Tom Hunt want to ask a question.

David Simmonds: It was the question you asked, Chair, about why some schools seem to be able to offer a much more comprehensive curriculum than others, so I think it has been covered in Paul's answer. Thank you.

Q172 **Tom Hunt:** On some of that data, it is very concerning that apparently only 8% of children from deprived backgrounds are supplying work that has been set, which probably demonstrates the limitations of learning packs and the importance of online learning during this period. Online learning clearly has its limitations, but it is better than nothing, and it is important that we get attendance rates high. It does concern me. There is not as much data available at the moment as we would like.

We naturally monitor the national media and we see quotes in there from teaching union, et cetera. It concerns me slightly when I read a quote from the NEU in *The Daily Telegraph*, saying, "Do not expect teachers to livestream lessons from their homes, nor engage in any video calling.



Except in specific, special circumstances, it is not possible to recreate the classroom in this way, and the NEU has advised teachers not to do so.” It concerns me that one of the major teaching unions—if that quote is accurate, which I imagine it is because it is in a national publication—is actively discouraging teachers from taking part in online learning. If it is, perhaps that bears true for some of the very concerning figures from the Sutton Trust about low levels of online engagement.

Paul Whiteman: I obviously cannot speak on behalf of the NEU, and I do not know the context of the quote that it gave in that respect, but our experience of school leaders is that online learning is not just about video lessons and video calls into homes. There are some very real safeguarding issues about beaming into a child’s home from your own home and how to take those lessons as well. There are some issues to talk about there.

As I say, this is a whole new discipline that we have developed. We are seven weeks in, into our eighth week now. The first couple of weeks were spent closing down schools to the majority of pupils and making arrangements for the vulnerable children and the children of key workers who needed to come in. We have completely changed the discipline of education in a matter of about five weeks. Learning new skills and learning new ways of delivering online and through learning packs is something that is in its infancy, but it is something that we are going to have to continue to work on.

If we are looking at a phased return and not whole access to school, the relationship between school and home is going to necessarily be a different relationship. This is a conversation that is going to have to continue beyond 1 June and probably beyond the September arrival back, as everybody would hope for.

Q173 **Chair:** Thank you, Paul. We will give you a rest for a minute, so you can get some water if you need it.

Emily, from the Safeguarding Alliance, you have publicly identified what you call a “new frontier of vulnerable children.” They are outside the Government’s existing categories of vulnerable children. Can you explain what you mean by that and what you think is happening to vulnerable children during the coronavirus?

Emily Konstantas: What we describe as the new frontier of vulnerabilities is those children who do not currently meet the definition. They may not be deemed vulnerable due to having a social work involvement, being a looked-after child or having SEND requirements. It may be that they are facing new difficulties in response to Covid-19. Echoing what Barnardo’s has said, these are new vulnerabilities that have not yet been identified: children living at home with lack of internet access, children experiencing mental health crises for the first time. These are the new vulnerabilities around which we have an increased concern.



Q174 **Chair:** What do you think should be done about it? Should the Government have some additional categories? What should be done specifically?

Emily Konstantas: I believe it is about delegating the power to the schools. The schools are working with the pupils. They know their pupils best. They are working with them on a day-to-day basis. In most circumstances, schools are working with pupils over 39 weeks of the year. I think it is important that where a school is identifying a pupil as being vulnerable, even if they do not fall within the definition of vulnerability, support services are still available based on the diagnosis of the school itself.

Q175 **Chair:** Are you doing any surveys or getting help with data on this new frontier of vulnerabilities for vulnerable children?

Emily Konstantas: Yes. We are currently working with a number of schools across the country, an example being the technical support that was very greatly offered by the Government. It is a fantastic initiative, but we are seeing—again, going back to the definition of vulnerability—it is the children who do not fall within that category of vulnerability who may not be able to access such support. For example, we are in discussions at the moment with a trust that has 8,000 pupils, and it has been able to obtain an allocation of only 28 laptops for pupils.

Q176 **Chair:** You talked about exposure to online harms. Could you explain further?

Emily Konstantas: In response to Covid-19, many pupils will be educated online currently. That brings a whole host of safeguarding concerns. For example, it is a well known fact that potential predators will be well aware of the large increase in pupils online and will also be accessing online facilities in order potentially to speak to children. My other concern is that while lockdown is in place those threats are possibly not immediate threats, but when lockdown starts to be lifted, relationships could potentially have been formed with pupils online and predators could start meeting up with children subsequent to lockdown being lifted.

Q177 **Ian Mearns:** Paul, can I ask you a specific question first in regard to the return to schools? What specific consultation did the DfE conduct with the NAHT about the proposed return date that the Government have come up with this week?

Paul Whiteman: We have been engaged with the Department on a regular basis over the last few weeks to talk about the worries and the barriers. We have not been consulted specifically about the date and the year groups that were suggested in the last 24 to 48 hours. There have been much more general conversations on an ongoing basis.

Q178 **Ian Mearns:** With regard to appropriate social distancing within schools when they return, you have mentioned that pupil group sizes of 15 might



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be problematic for many schools. Even the 10 or 12 that you mentioned might be problematic for many other schools. I have local schools where head teachers have suggested a maximum of six or eight, given the size of classrooms. Would you concur with that?

Paul Whiteman: Each individual school is very different and each is unique in its buildings and how it will work. If social distancing is, as we understand it now, the two-metre rule to be applied in schools, there are very many schools that are saying it is simply impossible to achieve, whether that is 10, 12, six or eight. We have a whole breadth of challenge there.

We are also learning from other countries about the return. For some of the things you would need to get into schools to achieve social distancing—such as more sanitary facilities, more toilets and things like that—there is a huge lead-in time to deliver them that goes beyond the three weeks that we are looking at for 1 June. Social distancing is going to be a massive problem.

One of the things that is more of a worry is that there is a bit of a debate right now about whether social distancing for younger children is different from how it is more broadly understood. If social distancing is going to be on different terms for schools, we are going to have to really understand on what basis it is different to give confidence to parents and to the sector that the rules are not just fitting the problem, rather than us trying to discuss the art of the possible, considering the advice from the scientists and the clinicians.

Q179 **Ian Mearns:** Is there any specific educational rationale that you can think of for the year groups, particularly in the primary sector, that have been selected for early return—reception, year 1 and year 6?

Paul Whiteman: Yes, there is. Early development is very important, and year 6 is important for transitioning. That said, you can mount an argument for the educational value at year 5 as being just as important as year 6. The worry about the younger year groups—of course, we argue strongly in normal circumstances for the value of that early education—is that it is with those groups that it is most difficult to achieve social distancing and the levels of hygiene, through hand washing, in their contact with adults and other children. There is a real balance to be struck there and it is one where we really need to understand the advice it is based upon.

Q180 **Ian Mearns:** Given the different levels of contact that have been achieved by schools across the country, how might schools avoid stigmatising disadvantaged children in their efforts to support them catching up and in their return to the classroom?

Paul Whiteman: This is going to be a real challenge going forward. We know that for children who are defined as vulnerable, the definition of vulnerable is unhelpful in the first instance in any event. There are a lot of children who would qualify as vulnerable that actually are not



vulnerable in the physical sense of needing to find school as a safe haven on a daily basis. The difficulty of stigma is a very real one. I think we need to change our language around this. We need to change our language to one of priority rather than one of vulnerability, although it will be driven by vulnerability in some senses. We need to make sure that we remove the stigma as far as we possibly can.

Importantly, what we are seeing in replies from our members is not that vulnerable children are just failing to turn up. The parents of these children are taking seriously the “stay at home” message from Government and are holding their children back through similar fears of exposure to the virus, safety concerns for their children and all the rest of it. We are going to have to persuade the parents and families of those children as much as anybody else that there is enough confidence in the system. As I said earlier, there is simply not enough understanding of the scientific basis for the return for that confidence to exist right now.

Q181 Ian Mearns: I think one of the major concerns of everybody out there is the prospect of asymptomatic transmission of the disease. With that possibility, how does one tell who is a risk and who is not?

Paul Whiteman: We need to understand not only the transfer between children and how children suffer the disease, but the transfer from children to adults. The science on that is very competitive as we observe it right now. I have seen competing science on whether or not children transmit the virus to adults.

If there is a significant chance of transmission between children and adults, and then adults into the wider community and into households who are shielding and all the rest of it, that is a real difficulty that takes us back to the social distancing measures within schools that are so difficult to achieve. I am not an epidemiologist or a clinician, but I do want to understand what those people are saying about it so that we can understand what social distancing is necessary and whether it is possible within a school setting.

Q182 Ian Mearns: Emily, have you anything to add on any of that?

Emily Konstantas: I completely agree with what Paul is saying. It is about conducting a robust risk assessment both of health and safety but also taking into consideration the safeguarding and wellbeing impacts on the children. It is not just a case of coming back to school and the physical restraints of social distancing. Many children have been in isolation for a number of weeks now and have not had any outside contact with their peer groups and pupils of their own age. It is going to take a lot of integration to get those children to come back, and also to get parents and carers to feel comfortable sending their children back. That is a huge consideration that must be thought of.

Q183 Chair: Just to be clear, are you saying, both of you, that you believe the jury is still out on the 1 June opening? Are you saying that you are not



yet clear about the science and medical advice, and you need further conditions to be met before you think it is right to open on 1 June?

Paul Whiteman: Perhaps I could expand on my answer first. As we understand the requirements of social distancing today, we do not think that is possible for the return outlined in what we have heard overnight and the day before. We are still getting to grips, frankly, with the advice that was released late yesterday afternoon, so we are getting into the detail of that. We will be able to respond to that more later on.

I think the real issue here, as much as anything else, is the very important bond of trust between school and family. That is even more important for families of vulnerable children. They have to trust school. If school leaders and teachers are in a position where they are not quite sure of the basis of the return and the amount of risk that is being assumed in the school setting, there is a void of trust out there at the moment—all of the survey data we are getting is that the vast majority of children's parents do not have confidence in a return around 1 June. If you are going to fill that void, we need to understand the underpinning science. We need to understand the medical advice that goes with it so that we can then determine whether or not that is possible within the school setting.

Emily Konstantas: I was going to add on that note that I think it is about balancing the safety of the child in both the home and the school for a return for 1 June. It is not just going to be a simple case that schools open on 1 June and pupils will start to return. There is a lot of assessment and planning that is going to take place for pupils, parents and teachers if it is going to be done properly.

If we are looking specifically at the early years, many younger children will be completely immersed in family life. They will be going from being immersed in family life into a potential setting where there may be limitations for social distancing and that is going to have longer-term effects on the children themselves. I think that is really important to consider.

Q184 **Chair:** I have a question from Caroline Johnson, a member of our Committee, who has technical difficulties. She was contacted by a constituent this week who has described her two daughters at two different senior schools locally. One is doing online lessons, marking and returning work and chasing work not submitted with parents directly. The other daughter is being set work by email, no online lessons are provided, work is not for return or marking in the vast majority of cases, and parents and child are not sure if the work is correct. The mother is very worried about how to help the second child. Caroline Johnson says that she recognises that schools and teachers are working really hard on this, but how can parents get further help if they need it? And how can schools work together to learn from each other?



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Paul Whiteman: Schools are in contact with the vast majority of families. If concerns are being raised, my advice would be to talk to the teachers and school leaders who are in contact.

The differences in approach will be necessitated by the different circumstances of each individual school and the approaches they have taken. The vast majority of work being set, whether it is learning packs, online learning or whatever it is, is still closely aligned to the curriculum that the school has adopted. There should be a direction of travel that is known to both the child and the family, but be in contact with the school.

I think there is a bit of an unfortunate picture being painted at times that there are a lot of teachers sitting around waiting for someone to say, "Come back to work." That is not the case. Teachers are working incredibly hard from schools and from their homes to deliver learning, so if there is something that seems to be missing, talk to the school and get underneath what more can be done. As I say, this is a completely new discipline to parents, teachers and schools in how to deliver learning in this way, so we need to learn together and build an even deeper coalition between family and school.

Emily Konstantas: This echoes the fact that there is not one response to the learning for Covid-19. Every school will do things differently based on the needs of their pupils, staff and parents' and carers' situations. I think it is really important that is taken into consideration when making any directions or guidance from the Government. Based on geographical differences, there is the requirement for a different response.

Q185 **Tom Hunt:** I am concerned about some of the points made by not just one teaching union but actually quite a few. Clearly, it is absolutely reasonable for parents to have concerns about sending their children back to school right now. A number of questions need to be answered. Does it concern you, as somebody very senior in a teaching union, that a senior teaching union has effectively ruled out any kind of opening before September, presumably even if its concerns are met?

Paul Whiteman: Sorry, I missed the first part of your question. It was not coming through right from the start.

Tom Hunt: Does it concern you that a major teaching union, the NASUWT, has pretty much ruled out supporting any kind of opening of schools before September, presumably even if reasonable concerns around safety are met?

Paul Whiteman: There is not a school leader or a teacher that I have spoken to who wants to delay a return to school for any longer than is absolutely necessary. The drive from everybody that I am speaking to at the moment is to understand the level of risk that the Government are asking schools to assume, quantify that, risk assess it and then fully mitigate it. I think that is entirely reasonable not just for teachers and school leaders but for the children, their parents and the communities



they serve. I think that is where the difficulty lies right now, that there is not the depth of understanding around that that is necessary to then breathe confidence into the whole of the school community that we can do this successfully. There is a lot of talking to be done over the next few hours and couple of days to get underneath what we are being asked to do, even around those basics of: is it 15 in a class? Is it six in a class? What is it that keeps everybody safe? What is it that schools can actually deliver?

Q186 **Jonathan Gullis:** To declare an interest—on what Tom mentioned earlier—I am still an associate member of the NASUWT, having been a frontline teacher since leaving university.

We have heard about whether schools should fully or formally reopen. I have had, for example, Lauren and Beth in my constituency of Stoke North, who are year 12 students and are feeling very anxious about missing out on key learning. What do you think should happen over the summer holidays? This is for both of you, by the way. I think that with those key year groups—let's say year 5s, as you mentioned earlier, Paul and Emily, but also years 10 and 12—schools should be open over the summer holidays so that those children get some sort of catch-up. Those exams next year are going to be critical to their futures.

Paul Whiteman: There is a superficial attraction to that. It seems a very simple answer to the amount of time that has been lost. There is a lot more depth to the question that would need to be considered. Schools have been operating and many children are still learning. We are already beginning to get requests from children about the levels of fatigue they are suffering, which might not be caused by the amount of learning they are doing but just the situation that they are dealing with. The emotional fatigue that children are suffering right now is something that should not be forgotten. There is an issue there.

Some of the readjustment that we have discussed with the panel earlier is not just necessarily about an educational readjustment. It is a readjustment to school and a readjustment to socialisation with others that will take some time before any educational benefit will come through, so there are some difficulties there.

The other issues that we need to be concerned about include beginning to understand what would normally be delivered in the September-to-Christmas term, which is normally the most pressurised term for children and students. The amount of educational advantage we normally get in the last couple of weeks of that term is diminishing anyway. If we work them through the summer as well on what superficially looks like an attractive proposition, we might lose towards the back end of that term in any event. I think it is a much more complex picture.

The amount of planning needed for the September term will be increased as well because the education will be delivered in a different way. If we are educating throughout the summer and then planning for a different



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delivery of education from September to December, when does that take place, if that is all taking place over the summer as well? There are superficial attractions to that, but there is a whole order of complexity below it that will have to be considered very carefully before plans are made.

Emily Konstantas: I agree with that. The question needs to be about what they are going to be doing over the summer holidays. Is it going to be a case of children and pupils going in to be educated and to receive a form of education, or is it going to be in the form of a care setting? They are two very separate things. I think what Paul is saying is correct.

During Covid-19 and home and remote learning, pupils are still learning at home. The vast majority are not sitting at home. They are still undertaking a form of education. It is important that staff and teachers do not have a burnout over the summer holidays, and pupils as well. We have to take into consideration their wellbeing needs above anything.

Q187 **Jonathan Gullis:** I will come back to you on that point. We have heard the data that there are a lot of kids who, especially in the state sector, are not interacting or engaging with the learning online. I have a huge fear of the amount of learning that is being missed at the moment, and I know you guys share that, and of course I understand the importance of not fatiguing children unnecessarily. I understand the importance of teachers. As I said, I was one myself. I know those six weeks are vitally important to recharge the batteries.

If we have any chance of getting the year 5s, 10s and 12s caught up in any shape or form—and maybe those reception and year 1s as well, as we know those early years are so crucial to a child’s learning—otherwise we are going to see a whole generation failed and left behind. Unlike the current year 11s and 13s, who in some ways have a slight advantage with the fact that they are not having to sit exams—they may or may not be happy with the results that come in—I fear there is a real gap there.

I agree that what I am talking about is fantasyland in some regards. You cannot just open them up. There has to be a lot of research into it to make sure it is scientifically safe. I agree that there should be an element of academia, but there should also be care for disadvantaged pupils or pupils who may be suffering from the mental fatigue that you mentioned, but I feel that school is the safest place. School is the building that a lot of vulnerable children feel safest in. We need to do everything we can to catch them up. That is my comment.

My final question is that there is widespread concern about the disadvantaged pupils and that they will fare disproportionately badly from school closures. What should we do right now to ensure they can catch up?

Emily Konstantas: Just because some pupils are not accessing online learning does not necessarily mean that they are not undertaking



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learning at home. Many schools are providing physical packs for pupils where they do not have the internet as a means to communicate.

I completely agree on the second point. A school building itself, in the eyes of many pupils, is a safe building. That does not necessarily mean that over the summer it needs to be teaching staff in the school buildings undertaking the teaching. It could be through engaged partnerships with charities such as the Diana Award or Place2Be, other charities, and creating partnerships to come in and support those pupils both for the wellbeing element and for the academic level.

In response to the disadvantage, I think it goes back to categorising what pupils will be classed as being disadvantaged in response to Covid-19. Many families would argue, even those who are not technically classed as being disadvantaged: are their children not disadvantaged in response to Covid-19, without having any other additional vulnerabilities, by the mere fact that they are having to be educated at home and they are social distancing? It is about considering the wider remit of disadvantages in response to Covid.

Paul Whiteman: All I would add is that everybody is seized of the apparent problems that have been caused by the lockdown and the restricted access to schools, so I do not think anybody disagrees on the problem. It is finding the right solution. The worry that we have is that superficially attractive methods of doing this could come back and not make up the ground at all. If we overload students and overload their teachers, the amount of advantage we get declines the longer we go into it.

It is worth remembering that no one has had a proper break since Christmas—that is teachers and their students—in that they will have had a half-term week but a lot also took work through the normal Easter closing period just to make sure that this new discipline of teaching children at home was as developed as it possibly could be. I think we need to remember that. This is a whole new discipline. No one is trained to deliver education in this way, and we are getting to grips with it as a very new thing and that can continue. There are lots of answers. I understand the attractiveness of the simplicity, but I think we will have exhausted children and exhausted teachers in schools in the back end of the year, and we will lose just as much then as we have lost in this period of closedown.

Q188 **Dawn Butler:** Thank you both very much for your responses and all of your work. There is obviously a lot of infrastructure that needs to be put in place to make sure children are able to catch up after Covid.

Can I drill down on PPE? It seems that what you are saying is that you do not have the correct facilities for teachers to be able to carry out their jobs effectively, efficiently and safely. Once schools reopen, teachers will become the frontline workers. We know that kids are, in the main, asymptomatic and we know there are different strains of Covid, so the



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teachers will be exposed to all these different strains of Covid. Do you think teachers have enough, or any, PPE to be able to carry out their jobs as teachers safely, and does it differ between schools? Do special schools with children with special needs need additional support and PPE to carry out their jobs?

I think five or six weeks is not enough time for you to prepare what is needed, but it would be good to find out from you. Do you think there is enough in place currently, and what do you think needs to happen going forward?

Paul Whiteman: If I can take the special schools point first, we have had particular difficulty in special schools, especially in those schools that are caring for children with profound needs, where some children spit and some children need more intimate contact with teachers. We have had perverse situations sometimes where medical staff in those schools are provided with PPE because they are told they need it and teachers are not because they are told that they do not need it. We have some real difficulties there and we do not really have medical advice or the scientific basis for that difference going forward. We need to understand that. I am going to keep coming back to a lack of understanding in the educational sector about what is recommended.

Getting into mainstream schools, there is not any PPE. Any teachers that are wearing PPE have obtained it for themselves and are doing it on their best estimate of what is necessary going forward. One of the things we keep asking Government to do is, if they are convinced that PPE is not necessary, to explain why. It is necessary for intimate contact everywhere else. If there is a credible explanation as to why it is not necessary, I am sure the teaching profession will accept it. On Friday I was talking to clinicians and they were absolutely clear with me that children have a similar viral load to the rest of society and can transmit the disease the same as everybody else. The only reason that it is slightly different is the height of children in comparison to an adult with a sneeze or a cough and all the rest of it. If that is competing science, we need to understand that it is competing science and we can understand the risks and mitigate them, dependent on what Government ask us to do.

That is a very long answer. The summary of it is that we do not know what PPE is needed and none is available for schools right now anyway.

Emily Konstantas: The question, if it is required for teaching staff to wear, is the practicalities. Will PPE be made available to teachers? If so, I know it is a small consideration but what happens to children with allergies, such as latex allergies? Will latex-free gloves, for example, be provided to teachers? There is a whole host of considerations that must be taken into consideration when we are looking at PPE for teachers. Again, if the Government are saying that it is not required, there needs to be firm evidence as to why.

Dawn Butler: Thank you both very much. We lost 200 frontline doctors



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very early on who were exposed to different strains of the virus, and next teachers will be on the frontline exposed to different strains of the virus.

Q189 **Chair:** On the back of Dawn's question, just to be clear, should there be much stronger PPE guidance for teachers who are in vulnerable settings or looking after children with behavioural difficulties?

Paul Whiteman: Yes. I think it is a simple answer of yes.

Emily Konstantas: It is not just working with children with behavioural difficulties. There needs to be guidance for all teachers working with all children, because—many teachers will concur with this—there may be an occasion where a child is sick in school or is unwell and a teacher is going to have to tend to that child. There needs to be guidance for the whole of the teaching profession.

Q190 **Chair:** Paul, do you feel the guidance is not strong enough or not clear enough at present?

Paul Whiteman: There is not any real guidance right now, other than we are told that PPE is not necessary and washing your hands with soap and water is all you need to do. That may well be the case, but no one has explained why that is the case to give sufficient confidence in the school setting.

Q191 **Chair:** Do you have regular conversations with Public Health England and the medical officers?

Paul Whiteman: We get information through the Department for Education. We are hoping to meet directly with Public Health England going forward.

Q192 **David Johnston:** This is to both of you. There have been suggestions that we should get graduates and retired people from the profession to go into schools to help with this. What do you think about the idea of such schemes and, if they happen, how do we best use them?

Paul Whiteman: I would refer back to the answer I gave about the summer, to some extent, that we cannot overload children over the summer period and we cannot overload children with too much learning. They have only so much capacity.

One of the problems we have in education is the recruitment and retention crisis, so there are not enough teachers around. Access to former teachers has a superficial attraction. One of the worries there, though, is that if they are retired teachers, would they naturally be more aligned with the vulnerable groups we are concerned about at the moment, and would we be putting them in front of children who may be carrying the virus and be asymptomatic? There are some very pertinent issues about how many people would be available to us in that sense, and then some planning issues about making sure that what is delivered by those people is in line with the curriculum of the school and everything that is needed. It is not a rejection, but it is slightly more complex.



Graduates or undergraduates are not teachers. I think parents are discovering very quickly that teaching is a skill and a profession, and getting children to engage and delivering education in the right way is quite a complex task. Therefore, it is not as simple as just finding people who are willing; it is finding people who have the skills to do it properly. Otherwise we will compound some of the issues that are arising through the lockdown.

Q193 Kim Johnson: We have had a discussion this morning about vulnerability and how the word is not useful at the moment, given that some children, as a result of coronavirus, are likely to be classed as vulnerable due to poverty, food insecurity and mental health. My question is to Emily. How effective have schools and social work teams been at chasing non-attendance of vulnerable children who are expected to be in school?

Emily Konstantas: A lot of schools that we have been working with have been undertaking daily welfare calls to pupils who have been offered a place but have not attended. In some instances, we have been in contact with a head teacher who has personally been making home calls, physically going to the home to check on the child. It is not just about those children who were offered places in the school due to vulnerability. It goes back to this new frontier of vulnerability. There are many children who are vulnerable in the home, who were not eligible for a place at school because they were not technically classed as being vulnerable, who teachers have considerable concerns about. It is about assessing all aspects of vulnerability around the child.

Q194 Kim Johnson: How easy is it for schools to get in contact with social workers and children's services to discuss these concerns, particularly as we have heard there has been an increase in domestic abuse, and children will be affected by living in those environments?

Emily Konstantas: If we look at the national statistics on the characteristics of children, the data from 2018 to 2019, there were nearly 400,000 children in need and 53,000 children subject to child protection plans. That is over 450,000 children previously known to social services. They are under a huge amount of pressure, and obviously there is a capacity issue.

I think what we are seeing is the schools have always been the hub for maintaining contact with pupils, and they continue to be so. They are absolutely pivotal during Covid-19 and are key to the safety of children. It is about delegating more powers to the schools in such situations to identify and make the required changes necessary to safeguard the child during this time.

Q195 Kim Johnson: A lot of schools have suffered as a result of 10 years-plus of austerity. Given the pressure on local authority children's services teams, are they having to prioritise children most at risk at the expense of those who may need a lower level of support? What would be the consequences of this?



Emily Konstantas: The consequence is that a child could potentially be missed off the statutory radar. If we look at the key documents for safeguarding children—"Working Together to Safeguard Children" and "Keeping Children Safe in Education"—every aspect makes remarks about early intervention. The schools are picking up on early intervention and making the referrals.

There is a capacity issue. Covid-19 has shown that there are so many more children being vulnerable because they are living in a household potentially with domestic violence. They are suffering mental health and wellbeing issues because they have been at home alone, social distancing, isolating. There are potential online safety considerations that we have to remember as well. What Covid-19 has done, in essence, is hinder the early intervention that schools do so well because of a capacity issue.

Paul Whiteman: It is absolutely correct that schools are the centre of identification and then reference to other agencies that they work with for the children they are concerned about. School leaders and teachers have been making contact during this period with homes that they are concerned about. Of the members replying to our survey, 60% have made referrals during the period of the lockdown, so you can see the pressure that is there. It is difficult, as social services were under pressure before this and are under even more pressure now, so the access to social services is not any easier.

The one thing I think we need to take care about going forward is, if there is a discussion about the expansion of the role in this regard for teachers and school leaders, they should not step outside their expertise or their competence. There are very specialist things that social services do that teachers should not be expected to do. If we do that, we could cause dangers that are not currently there. We need to maintain a multiagency approach.

Q196 **Jonathan Gullis:** I want to come back to the point David Johnston made earlier. We have seen this call for an army of volunteers within both the NHS and the social care sector. I am here as a former teacher, begging to go back into schools in my constituency and help out where I can. The issue I am facing, for example, is having to go through a lot of paperwork and process to make sure that the correct safeguarding checks are in place. I totally get that. Obviously, we cannot just have Jonathan Gullis off the street with no teacher reference number, but something needs to be done to allow people like myself to come back into the school without having to go through every single school and filling in paperwork.

Emily, I was wondering whether what you do in the Safeguarding Alliance, but also Paul from the NAHT, could help in putting pressure on this so that we can go back into schools—whether that is people who left the profession and retired or people who have gone into new careers—so we can come back and help in some small way. I am finding it incredibly frustrating that I have to fill in a form for every single school and go



through a safeguarding check in every single one.

Emily Konstantas: I completely agree. There needs to be a portability of safe recruitment in response to Covid-19 and how we look at bringing in an army of volunteers. For example, it could be trainee teachers, trainee social workers, who would have already undertaken a DBS at the start of their course and could potentially look at using their summer work as part of their credits to obtaining their qualifications over the summer. Obviously, they themselves will have missed out on the potential to undertake the necessary requirements they need to pass.

As long as the appropriate, robust safeguard checks are in place for every single school and every single volunteer, I think it is a good idea. The key message with this is that it has to be done safely. What must not happen is that, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, we turn into a child protection epidemic. It is absolutely paramount that there is that portability; for example, with the DBS that all schools have access to the update system. I think that is possible as long as it is done safely. There are many volunteers out there who, like yourself, are raring to go and support schools over the summer.

Paul Whiteman: I will not expand further on the safeguarding aspects of that. We have to be content that children are properly protected no matter what arrangements or modified arrangements are in place.

The worry about the army of volunteers is that we can increase the capacity of those willing to bring education into schools and bring support to schools, but that does not increase the capacity of children to learn. There is a real, key concern that we overload children over the forthcoming period and their ability to catch up is restrained by their capacity to take information in. We might have a mismatch there between those willing to step in and the ability of children to work as fast as we might have the ambition for them to do to catch up what they have lost over the lockdown.

Q197 **David Johnston:** Is it your position that schools might not need any more people to deal with this? They might need more money, but it sounds like you do not want graduates, you do not want the retired. I am getting the sense that you think they can probably cope with the people they have, notwithstanding the teacher recruitment issues and where we have vacancies still. Is that right?

Paul Whiteman: No. I have probably overplayed the point. What I am saying is that it is not a rejection of volunteers or help coming into the sector but it is very careful consideration about what they are being asked to deliver and how that is being delivered. On the face of it, it looks like there are plenty of people coming in and we can make up whatever has been lost over a short period of time, but there is much more consideration to be made about the children's capacity to react to that and the organisation of it. If I have overplayed the point, my apologies,



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but I do not think it is as easy as the headline would sound that we have all these volunteers waiting to come in.

Q198 Jonathan Gullis: Paul, we are talking about overloading children. The last thing we want to do is create even more pressure on CAMHS and the mental health services. I was a former head of year; I understand the difficulties that many children are going through.

My fear is that a lot of children also benefit massively, socially and mentally, from, first, having the routine of school and, secondly, having a chance to see their friends in a setting—yes, two metres apart—in some safe way. Of course the health and safety comes first, but I think we are underplaying how resilient young people can be and the benefits of them going into an education setting and being among their peers and staff members. That is my only fear with this, that we are not looking at it from the positive angle. We are looking at just the negatives.

Chair: Can I add to that before you answer, because it is related? Michael Wilshaw, the former Chief Inspector of Schools, as you know, has said that there needs to be a big catch-up programme for children and they should possibly come in on weekends and in the summer. While I accept that schools will not officially be open in the summer—I understand that—why on earth couldn't one have summer schools to help these young children catch up in both pastoral care and education, if there were voluntary tutors and existing charities that were already on the ground, helping these children reorient themselves and have some learning and pastoral care?

Paul Whiteman: It sounds like I am rejecting the concept of summer provision through schools, which is something that happens regularly anyway over the summer with access to school. That is not the position. There is a whole difference between access to school buildings and access to the social settings, which will be necessary for reacquainting children back to the setting and socialisation and everything else. That is part of the worries we have. It is not just about education. It is about the whole route back out of the crisis from home into the school setting. I am not rejecting that. My answers were more akin to the idea that an army of people can catch up the education that has been lost, and it is not as simple as that. It is much more complex.

Emily Konstantas: It is important to reiterate the fact that schools do not just educate, which is what Jonathan was saying. They provide the pastoral care as well as the academic provision. A summer school programme, with the safe support of an army of volunteers, would be a good idea for reintegrating children back into school ready for a September whole-school start.

Q199 Chair: Thank you. Paul, you do not agree with what Michael Wilshaw said about needing weekends and extra catch-up, is that right, or have I misunderstood you?



Paul Whiteman: There are two separate questions being debated here. It is access for pastoral care and access for resocialisation and everything else, and then there is the catch-up question. With the catch-up question, there is only so much education children can take in one go, and there is the concept of fatigue for them as well as for everybody else. There needs to be a whole lot of care in planning how that takes place, not to overload children, of course, and cause unintended consequences further down the track.

Jonathan Gullis: I totally understand the complexity with this. It will not surprise my Committee members that I am of a Michael Wilshaw-esque mindset that to catch up is going to involve a huge effort. My fear is that the transition years and exam years in the 2020-21 academic year are going to be failed. As we know, when kids are taught the curriculum, different orders of curriculum are done in different ways in schools. When it comes to writing these exams and then putting in the grade boundaries, it is going to be an absolute nightmare.

I think the only way we are going to get close to solving this, in allowing the catch-up time for curriculum teaching, is going to be through some sort of part-time, staggered over the day—however it might work—summer school programme for those key year groups.

Q200 **Ian Mearns:** You might have heard of a company called Edenred, Paul. I am wondering if there are any particular lessons that can be learned from the Government's efforts to put into place a national free school meal voucher system in a short space of time. Was there an overreliance on this system by schools when perhaps, as has been suggested by Ministers, alternative local arrangements would have been better to support local families in need? Was that supposition of an alternative local arrangement totally contingent on appropriate funding being provided?

Paul Whiteman: This is a really difficult issue. When we were talking about the launch of the free school meal voucher system with the Department, I left those conversations with the very clear impression that this was the preferred method for delivery of vouchers to families that were entitled to them and it should supersede any local arrangements that were being made other than if schools were still cooking in their own kitchens or delivering food from the school. That was the clear understanding we left with. I think that is why Edenred was overrun with demand, because it was the central point and the preferred method of delivery for free school meal vouchers. Since then there has been some discussion about whether that was the case or whether it was the replacement if you could not make your own local arrangements, but I was very clear. Looking back over the press releases and the advice at the time, it was the preferred method of delivery.

Underlining that, the emergency funding available to schools has very specific limits on it. You could access it for delivering free school meal vouchers if you needed to locally, but the spending for free school meals



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was not red-circled within that limit, so you could exhaust that provision and have nothing left for the other costs that were coming in. When we asked the Department to red-circle so that our members could sort out local arrangements, that was not forthcoming and still has not been forthcoming. The reliance was upon the Edenred delivery.

The big learning points there are that, at no extra cost to the Treasury, schools could have made local arrangements. They had to make local arrangements anyway, and would have done very successfully. A better understanding about the positioning of the voucher system—it was probably lacking and that was its failure.

Q201 Ian Mearns: Have you had any discussion with the Department about whether the voucher scheme is going to continue through the Whitsun break, or have you had any information on that? We were discussing that earlier this morning.

Paul Whiteman: Yes. We would certainly like to see it continue because of the impact, but we have not had any in-depth conversation with the Department about that and what its attitude is as now.

Q202 Ian Mearns: Am I right in saying that the more than just initial teething problems in getting the scheme sorted out have, to a large extent, quietened down, or is this scheme much more accessible now than it was in those initial few weeks?

Paul Whiteman: The last data that we had is a week old now, so it could have improved this week. There was certainly a claim from the provider that all those wrinkles had been ironed out at the time we took our last data, and that was not the experience on the ground. That might be explained away by a lag between what is seen at the centre and what is experienced on the ground, but certainly every school leader I talk to is still complaining about the provision.

Q203 Ian Mearns: It is an expensive scheme. It runs into a couple of hundred million pounds involving the company, Edenred, and I think we need a good look at how this has been facilitated across the country. There have been some unfortunate situations where schools have managed to secure vouchers for parents who have turned up at supermarkets, got their shopping and have been turned away at the checkout because the vouchers could not be validated or redeemed.

Paul Whiteman: I think it is worth saying that schools locally can be much more agile than national Government. The point at which we saw this was beginning to fail was the point at which to give schools freedom and funding to make a local response so that families would not be put at disadvantage. I absolutely recognise that the Department, to be fair to it, is working incredibly hard in circumstances that are new to it as well. The officials that we deal with every day are clearly working incredibly hard. I think it is introducing that level of agency for schools that, when things begin to go wrong, there is trust that they are not going to load up the Exchequer with any more demand on free school meals. We know how



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much that is and how much should be there, so give them the freedom and the agility to find other solutions.

Q204 **Ian Mearns:** It is a little unfortunate that the Department did seem completely wedded to the Edenred scheme, despite the fact that, in answer to a question from me, it has admitted that there was no exclusivity clause with Edenred for providing the system.

Paul Whiteman: I do not know about the commercial contract and the commercial complexities that exist around the Edenred scheme, but there are no extra costs so there is no debate about an extra burden on the Exchequer. If it is going wrong, give schools the ability to find local solutions because they are excellent at doing that.

Ian Mearns: Thank you very much, Paul.

Q205 **Chair:** Thank you. Before we wrap up, if you could both answer this briefly. I know we have touched on this quite a bit. Do you believe there should be a catch-up premium to help those—I know that you were talking about not using the word “vulnerable”—vulnerable pupils who have been left behind as we enter the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis?

Paul Whiteman: Schools were under funding pressures before this crisis anyway, and the money that had been promised throughout the election campaign was only just beginning to be ready to arrive into schools. We are going to be under even more pressure when we come back, particularly with schools having to find the ability to deliver counselling services and extra support services, let alone their academic services. Therefore, extra funding in the form of a premium will be essential. There needs to be quite a lot of conversation about what that covers and how it is delivered but, yes, it would be absolutely essential.

Emily Konstantas: Yes, I completely agree. There should be a catch-up premium, but it needs to be easily accessible to schools, and schools need to make the decision as to where it needs to be allocated. There cannot just be one response for every single school across the country on a catch-up premium, because a catch-up premium in, for example, Tower Hamlets may be completely different to the catch-up premium required in Suffolk or Norfolk. I think it needs to look into the context for the requirements of the schools, and it needs the schools to make the decision on where it is going to be required.

Chair: Thank you for some sustained questioning. It is really appreciated from both of you. I wish you, your organisations and your members well, and I thank you and all your members. I wish all your members good health and safety as this goes on.