



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Foundation Years: Sure Start children's centres: Government response](#), HC 144

Wednesday 18 June 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 18 June 2014.

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Members present: Mr Graham Stuart (Chair); Neil Carmichael; Alex Cunningham; Bill Esterson; Pat Glass; Siobhain McDonagh; Ian Mearns; Caroline Nokes; Mr Dominic Raab; Mr David Ward; Craig Whittaker.

Questions 1-120

Witness: **Elizabeth Truss MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Education and Childcare), Department for Education.

Q1 Chair: Good morning and welcome, Minister, to this session of the Education Select Committee. It is good to have you here. Do you understand why you are here this morning?

Elizabeth Truss: I am delighted by any opportunity to speak to the Education Select Committee.

Q2 Chair: But do you know why you have been asked to come back on this particular inquiry?

Elizabeth Truss: To explain the Government's policies in more detail on children's centres.

Q3 Chair: I do not know if you saw what the *Education Journal* wrote on 17 March of this year: "In December 2013 the Education Select Committee published its report 'Foundation Years: Sure Start Children's Centres', following an inquiry that took almost a year with eight evidence sessions and written evidence that was published in two separate volumes. It took the Government, in the shape of the DfE, a little over two months to produce a 19-page response that would have shamed a first-year undergraduate." That is what the *Education Journal* wrote. That is perhaps a harsh description, but it is a description of why we have asked you to come back before us today.

Can you perhaps explain a little bit about the Government response? The Government is not obliged to accept recommendations made by this Committee, but I would have hoped for, and we normally do receive, at least an engagement with the arguments we have made and the evidence we produce, in order to give us a proper response, whether the

Government agrees with us or not, so that we feel that the process is a genuine one and one that has a genuine chance of influencing policy going forward.

Elizabeth Truss: It is fair to say on this particular subject that, over the past year, I as the Minister have been in discussions with Ofsted about changing the inspection regime. When I put out my response to the report, we were still in discussions with Ofsted, so it was quite difficult to talk about what is essentially quite a moving landscape. Since I gave my response to this Select Committee, we have had Ofsted's first "Early Years Annual Report", which has helped to clarify a lot of matters. Also, we have been able to further announce our intention in terms of inspections of children's centres.

To be honest, Mr Chairman, it is partly a timing issue. We changed the core purpose of children's centres, but the inspection regime was not quite fitting with that core purpose. Ofsted has now said that it will change the inspection regime in line with that core purpose. We have also made further announcements about a school-led system for early years, so having teaching schools in early years, having School Direct in early years. We have been able to announce more of our overall policy direction and intention than we were able to at that point. Because we as a Department were having internal discussions with Ofsted, it was difficult for me to be as clear as I might want to be about what the policy direction was.

I now think we are in a much better position. We also have more evidence on the efficacy of Sure Start centres. There was a report out last week that showed that Sure Start Centres were reaching 90% of the parents most in need, with an 88% satisfaction rate. We changed the core purpose. We were in discussion with Ofsted about how we better inspect centres. We have now indicated the direction of travel, though Ofsted has not put out its consultation, so the difficulty here has been a moving landscape, if I could put it like that.

Q4 Chair: Thank you. Can you tell us what priority the DfE gives to children's centres? How many staff within the DfE work on children's centre policy? Have they been in post for some time?

Elizabeth Truss: I would have to get back to you with the precise numbers. There are approximately 40 staff overall in the early-years and childcare team. Obviously, children's centres do have other Government Departments that have involvement—for example, the Department for Communities and Local Government actually sets the budget for Sure Start centres, effectively through the Early Intervention Grant. The Department of Health is very closely involved, and one of our main priorities is to get much better integrated working between health and education at a local level, so it is not just in the Department for Education, but I can certainly provide you with the precise number of dedicated team on that.

It is an important priority for the Department for Education, and a lot of the work that I have been doing over the past two years is making the system on the ground and our inspection regime reflect the policy outcomes we want to achieve with children's centres.

Q5 Chair: The inspection evidence suggests that a great number of children's centres are not good or better. Does that worry you?

Elizabeth Truss: There were improvements in the most recent set of data from Ofsted but, as I say, the inspection regime had not caught up with the revised core purpose. In some cases, children's centres are not being judged on what we now see as their primary role. What Ofsted will be doing, in future, is inspecting children's centres on a local authority basis, not as individual children's centres. They will be looking at how a local authority organises those children's centres, what those children's centres are doing in terms of reaching out to those parents most in need and the effectiveness of their engagement in the system. Rather than feeling that children's centres have to do it all, what are they doing to make sure those children's centres are helping parents access the two-year-old offer, helping them access local health services? It is much more sensible for that to be done on a local-authority-wide basis. That is the key part we are changing.

Michael Wilshaw's comments were very helpful, and I have taken the liberty of circulating to the Committee just the page on the landscape of early years and early help. What Michael Wilshaw said in his report was: "Many children's centres are doing a valuable job, but it is a job focused on working with potentially vulnerable families to provide early social help and healthcare. The proportion of children getting an early education from a children's centre is tiny...Children's centres, in the main, are not closing the educational gap." What he is saying, which is basically what our core purpose is saying, is it is about early help for parenting, early help for health, making sure that families are engaged and then the core role—

Q6 Chair: What about education? We recommended that the link that was removed by the Government between children's centres and a qualified teacher should be re-established, and that was, along with many of our other recommendations, rejected.

Elizabeth Truss: Primarily, we are developing a school-led system for early years. Schools actually provide a much greater proportion of early-years places than children's centres do. Can I just refer to the landscape document? We have 16,000 schools that have school nurseries. We have 3,000 children's centres, many of which do not provide early education. The comments of Margaret Hodge, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, are very relevant, and obviously she is the former Children's Minister. She said, only a couple of weeks ago in fact: "The sensible policy direction would have been to locate more and more of our childcare offer in schools rather than build other buildings partly because it would be more sustainable, partly because it would make better use of valuable community assets...and partly because it brings the influence of the education community to bear on the quality of childcare provision." I agree with what Margaret Hodge has outlined. That is what we are trying to do. There are some very interesting cases.

Q7 Chair: Where does that leave children's centres? It feels like there is a bit of confusion. In some senses, it has been hollowed out. There have been political promises around their maintenance so, although the numbers have fallen, we are hearing increasingly of centres that still exist, in inverted commas, but they have one member of staff working across maybe seven of them. You wonder to what extent we are having a totemic representation of children's centres without the reality.

Elizabeth Truss: Let us be clear: only 76 children's centres have actually closed since 2010, and six new centres have opened. There are actually 3,019 main children's centres and a further 531 additional sites open to families. If you look at what those children's

centres are doing, they are providing significant services: 98% are providing Stay and Play services for parents; 98% are providing other outreach services; 95% are providing home-based services; 94% are providing parent forums; 90% are providing parenting classes and relationship support. Those children's centres, we know, are doing significant helpful things, but it is not primarily early education and childcare. That is the crucial point.

Q8 Chair: There is an ongoing role. I just wondered, because you quoted Margaret Hodge who said we should not have done this in the first place; the 3,500 was probably a mistake. You should have built it more sustainably within schools. You said you agree with her. Where does that leave the existing network of 3,000 children's centres in the Government vision?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not think that is what Margaret Hodge was saying; maybe the Committee would like to interview her as well. What she was saying is, specifically on the provision of early education and childcare, the benefit of integration with the rest of the education community, i.e. schools, is very high.

If I could give you an example of the Medlock Primary School and children's centres in Manchester that I went to visit, that was previously a children's centre, which provided all that support—parental support, Stay and Play, support with employment, support with health services, so midwives based on site, etc.—and then it had a children's centre nursery and a school all in the same building. What practically has happened there is that, rather than the nursery being part of the children's centre, it has been integrated with the school. You have the headteacher managing the early education and childcare for children from age two upwards; meanwhile, the children's centre is carrying on with its core role of providing support to parents, providing help with health services and being a point of contact.

If you look at last week's results, which say that 90% of parents in need are accessing children's centres, they are a highly valued part. I had somebody come up to me after a speech I made yesterday and say, "The children's centre is an absolute lifesaver for me. It is fantastic. It gave me real help on parenting, support on breast feeding that I would not have got otherwise." It is that kind of service that the core function of the children's centre is providing. In terms of early education and childcare, I do agree with Margaret Hodge that, regardless of precisely which building it is based in, integrating it much more into the education system has to be the way forward.

Q9 Chair: Will you look again at the link with teachers?

Elizabeth Truss: No, for two reasons.

Chair: It is a strange integration that does not have a link to a teacher.

Elizabeth Truss: If there is childcare provision, in a case like Medlock Primary, it can be better integrated with the school at the local level. I am not saying there should be a national prescription for that. In any case, we do not prescribe the levels of qualifications for teachers in many schools and that is not a Government policy. What we look at are the outcomes for children, rather than saying we are going to specify the inputs. The point is that the children's centre itself is not primarily an early education and childcare facility; it is an early-help facility. That is what Sir Michael Wilshaw made very clear in his report.

There has been some confusion in the past about what the primary role of the children's centre is, which is what I wanted to clear up.

Q10 Alex Cunningham: I am particularly interested in the education end of it. Yesterday, we had an exchange on the Floor of the House about the Sutton Trust, saying that the quality of provision for existing two-year-olds is not good enough yet and you should not expand the programme. I am also interested in the fact that you talk about schools having a greater responsibility in being the future of provision, and local authorities having that overall responsibility as well. We have a world now where we have schools that are stand-alone; there are academies. The local authorities do not have anything to do with them. In fact, Lord Nash has made it clear that he does not want local authorities to have anything to do with academies whatsoever. Can you just explain how all that works, if the local authority has the responsibility, the schools have the responsibility and yet the schools are not responsible to the local authority?

Elizabeth Truss: Local authorities are responsible for making sure there is high-quality education provision in their area. That does not necessarily mean that they have to be providing that provision, but they are responsible, in the same way as they are responsible for attracting high-quality and brokering high-quality academies to come to their area.

Q11 Alex Cunningham: You could say, say you had a series of academies, "You are our five primary school academies in our area. We need you to provide this level of service or improve your service," and yet they do not actually have any authority to talk to them.

Elizabeth Truss: What we are seeing is a developing set of teaching schools, which have links to other schools and nurseries in their area, for example with private sector nurseries as well. That is what we want: school-to-school links and school-to-nursery links, so it is a school-led system, rather than necessarily a system led by the local authority or other parties.

Q12 Alex Cunningham: The responsibility is with the local authority. Are you giving the local authority the powers to tell the academies that they must provide sufficient quality provision?

Elizabeth Truss: In terms of children's centres, what we are saying is that the local authority is responsible, and we want to see Ofsted inspecting children's centres on a local authority basis to make sure the early help provided to parents is good, that we are seeing good outcomes for children and that parents are being reached. As we have seen in last week's report, 90% of parents are being reached. That is different from early education and childcare. Those are two different things.

Q13 Alex Cunningham: It is all part of the same continuum, isn't it?

Elizabeth Truss: It is not. I think this debate has been muddled by confusion about which is which. Can I just go back to the Chairman's question on the issue of quality and teacher-led care? What we know is, for early education and childcare, teacher-led care delivers the best outcomes for children. It delivers particularly the best outcomes for children from low-income backgrounds. It makes the most impact.

If we look at the proportion of staff in the most deprived area with at least a Level 6 qualification, i.e. a graduate qualification, it is the highest in school nurseries. In primary schools with nursery classes, 41% of the staff are at that level in deprived areas. In nursery schools, which we might talk about in a minute, it is 35%. In children's centres, it is 22%.

What do we know about where the best-quality early education is for those two-year-olds on our programme? We know that the best quality currently available, and obviously we are trying to promulgate that across the system, is in primary schools with nursery classes, which is why we are putting through primary legislation to enable those school nurseries to take two-year-olds, and it is why we are doing more to link school nurseries with other nursery schools with private providers, PVI providers, so that we have a school-led improvement of the system, because we know that that is where the quality early education is coming from.

Q14 Chair: When it comes to commissioning new children's services—you have just made that point very strongly—do you think that that commissioning should be linked to the quality of the provision that a provider already provides? When a local authority comes to commission a new children's centre provider, should it be a criterion that the provider is someone who provides good and outstanding current children's centre provision?

Elizabeth Truss: Yes. Some local authorities obviously provide it in house, so they run the children's centres themselves. Others will contract with third-party organisations and, of course, local authorities should be looking at the quality. They should be looking at the reach. One of the debates we had last time was the whole issue of universal versus targeted provision. I personally think that, unless you have everybody coming through the door of the children's centres, you do not know which are those most involved families.

Q15 Chair: We may be able to touch on that later. I just wanted to focus on this quality issue, because you pointed out the importance of promoting those who do a good job, as opposed to those who are less qualified and may do a less good job. In one local authority, councils were told by the commissioning team that Ofsted judgments were not a criterion in the evaluation of commissioning bids to find new providers for children's centres. In other words, it was not a criterion, when you were looking at who you select, whether or not the provision they already had was good or outstanding, as validated by Ofsted. In the same authority, the three nursery schools judged outstanding by Ofsted for the quality of their nursery education failed to win their bids to continue to run their children's centres. Instead, the bid was awarded to a national voluntary charity whose provision in the same local authority had received a requires-improvement Ofsted grading.

Is there something wrong with a system in which we have the inspector making these judgments and then, when it comes to commissioning new provision, the person who is failing can win the bid and the person who is outstanding does not even get to continue with their existing provision? Is there something wrong in the framework there and is that something for you to look at?

Elizabeth Truss: There are two different issues there. One is the extent to which the local authority takes responsibility for what is happening in children's centres. That is why Ofsted is going to be moving to a local-authority-based inspection regime, so that they go

into a local authority like Hampshire, talk to the local authority and look at all the children's centres. They are not just looking at what goes on in each centre; they are actually looking at the reach of the centres and the overall approach of the local authority. They are taking them all into account. The other point you were making—

Q16 Chair: The changed Ofsted focus on the whole of the local authority will lead, you think, to an improvement in the way they commission, so they are more likely to commission good provision rather than inadequate provision.

Elizabeth Truss: Yes, but the second point you made is that a nursery school's primary job is early education, whereas a children's centre's primary job is early help for parents and children. There may be different skills required in providing early education for children and being able to engage families, and engage the most-in-need families.

I think the problem with the inspection regime is it has partly been looking at early-education provision in children's centres. What we want to see is, where there is early education-provision in children's centres, that is judged under the early-education framework. Ofsted has announced that, at the moment, they have separate inspection regimes for school nurseries and other nurseries. Ofsted is going to put that under a single inspection regime, so everybody is being judged in the same way who is providing early education and childcare. If a children's centre has early education and childcare, they will be judged under that framework. On the early help side, they will be judged as part of this local-authority-based inspection, which will be how they are reaching out to families and how they are helping parents. That is a different set of activities.

Q17 Craig Whittaker: Morning, Minister. I just wonder if you could clarify something for me in particular. You have mentioned several times now that 90% of parents in need are accessing children's centres. Is that 90% of parents in need are registered at children's centres or are they physically engaging in children's centres? The two are clearly very different.

Elizabeth Truss: The two are different and it is all detailed here in this ECCE report. Essentially, they are using the centre at least once. I think that is the criterion. I can come back to you on the details of that, but they are engaged.

Q18 Chair: Once a year? It is an annual visit.

Elizabeth Truss: All the statistics are in the report. It does show that some parents are much heavier users of their children's centre than others, but the point is the parents have been to the children's centre and they know it is available to help them. That is important.

Q19 Craig Whittaker: Just for clarification then, to say that 90% of parents in need are accessing is a totally different thing to actually linking that to the outcomes. What are the outcomes for those 90%? That would probably indicate how many of those 90% are physically using them.

Elizabeth Truss: All we have at the moment is the feedback from the parents, which is that 88% of them think it is a good service that is being provided. We do not have outcome data yet and that is due to come out in 2015, in terms of how it has actually helped. One of the issues that I discussed with the Committee last time is that looking at

the outcome of a children's centre, we simply do not have the evidence and data, because the research was not commissioned. We have now commissioned the research, but obviously it does take time to come through and we will know that. I think it is May 2015 when that outcome data will be published.

Q20 Ian Mearns: In April, the Chief Inspector said that, in his view, the most important measure of success in the early-years sector is whether the poorest children are doing as well as their better-off peers by the time they start school, but he also pointed out that the gap between the poorest children and those from more advantaged backgrounds, by the age of five, had remained at 20 percentage points between 2007 and 2013, so no effective change during that period. He has highlighted his view of what is an important measure, so what are your most important measures of the success of your early-years policy?

Elizabeth Truss: In terms of the success of the overall early-years policy, I think it is closing the gap at age five, absolutely. There is an 18-month vocabulary gap between children on low income and high income, by the time that they are aged five. That is a very hard gap to close. Our policy aim is absolutely eliminating that gap.

Q21 Ian Mearns: Given that, from what he has stated, there has been no material change between 2007 and 2013, what do you think you need to be doing differently in order to close that gap?

Elizabeth Truss: All of the evidence suggests that high-quality early education is a very important factor in closing that gap. Our own studies at the Department for Education for the two-year-old programme have suggested that, where children are in good and outstanding nurseries, that does make an impact. It does not make any impact when they are in a satisfactory or requires-improvement nursery. Again, all the data shows that it is teacher-led care that is the really important differential between high and low-quality provision.

What are we doing? We have upgraded the status of early-years teachers. They now have to do the same tests as primary teachers, in terms of literacy and numeracy. We have seen a 25% increase in the number of early-years teachers qualifying. We are making it much easier for schools to expand their nursery provision. They can expand down the age range without any additional permission required. We are putting through legislation to enable two-year-olds to automatically be able to be accepted into schools, without those schools required to do an extra registration process with Ofsted.

We are also developing new teaching schools for the early years, so we are linking high-quality school nurseries with high-quality private sector nurseries and nursery schools, so we have a much more linked-up self-improving system. We are also expanding Teach First in the early years. This year we had 16 people in Teach First early years. It is going up to 50 this September. We want to expand it further. As the Committee will be aware, there are overall reforms going on to teaching. What is my ultimate aim? It is to see early-years teachers on the same basis as teachers.

Q22 Chair: Do we have a plan to get there? The provision is all very well but if, in the meantime, you do not get QTS, you do not get the same pay, you do not have the same career structure and you do not have the same benefits, why would the brightest people go in

where we most need them, which is in early intervention, if you do not have it in place? It is all very well having that aim, but if you do not have a stepped plan to get there, people could be forgiven for being sceptical.

Elizabeth Truss: We have started off by making sure that those teachers are qualifying with the same requirements, so doing the same tests. We are looking at further measures at the moment, which I cannot announce yet, but we are working on that, absolutely.

We have just changed the inspection regime to be much more focused on the level of qualifications that staff have. Ofsted started that from September. We have just changed the regime for children's centres or Ofsted is about to consult on the regime for children's centres. They have now announced that we are going to be inspecting school nurseries and other nurseries on the same basis, which is a major change because, previously, private and voluntary sector nurseries were inspected on much more of a compliance basis rather than an outcomes basis. We want to put the whole system on an outcomes basis, so we are making these changes, but the Committee will be aware that, in the education system, we do not want things like unforeseen consequences of, basically, in the short term, pricing people out of the market so there is a lack of availability of staff. There does have to be a step plan, but I can assure the Committee that we are working on it and it is the aim.

What is positive is the growing consensus—I think Margaret Hodge's comments are very important—that a school-led system is the right approach, that commonality across teaching is the right approach and that we need to make much better use of our school buildings and our school assets that we have not been making use of. The school nurseries have almost been a hidden part of our early-years system. Because they were not on the early years register, the debate almost has not acknowledged their existence as much. I do think this bubble chart is very useful, because it points out there are 16,000 school nurseries, as opposed to 418 nursery schools. In terms of where we can have the most impact, there is an awful lot of extra capacity and resource we can leverage from those really excellent school nurseries to help the rest of the system improve.

Q23 Ian Mearns: Minister, when you use statistics to back up your vision of things and you tell us that 90% of parents in need are users, but then, under questioning, you say that, by the way, of those, some of them might have only visited a centre once within the year; that hardly fills one with confidence that all of the 90% of the parents in need who are users are gaining access to the full range of services they would require in order for their children to be part of that closing the gap, by the time the youngster enters formal education. It is a kind of throwaway use of statistics, the 90%, which does not engender confidence from my perspective.

Elizabeth Truss: Can I comment on that? For some of these hard-to-reach families, making sure that they are actually coming to the children's centres and know the facility is available is very important. Also, quite often children's centres are a gateway into other services. Children's centres are a way of giving parents the early help that they need and the children the early help they need, but they are not the primary provider of early education and childcare which, as Sir Michael Wilshaw points out, is one of the major ways of closing the gap. That is where we need to look at the system as a whole, rather than expect children's centres to be doing all of that work.

The point I am making about the change we are making to local authority inspections is, because the inspections of children's centres will not be focused on the quality of early education and childcare, which they are under the current framework, they will be more focused on things like what the outreach is like to vulnerable parents and if parents are really using those services.

Q24 Ian Mearns: Even within that lies a problem because, from the exchange that you had earlier on with Alex, you are quite clear that local authorities have the responsibility. In some circumstances, with some providers, whether they be an academy school or a free school in the locality, the local authority could be impotent in order to exert any influence or to have any change brought about by that institution. The local authority has the responsibility but not the power. They may ultimately get the blame after the Ofsted inspection, but we are not actually building a framework here that can actually exert change, orchestrated by the local authority, because they have the responsibility.

Elizabeth Truss: The majority of primary schools are still under local authority control and, at present, certainly for the—

Q25 Ian Mearns: We have a schools commissioner who says he has a vision for a completely academised system within a relatively short space of time, so we have to tie these things together.

Elizabeth Truss: That is why I am talking about a school-led system, because academies and free schools have a role to play in that as well. They are capable of working with children's centres. I do not believe that, just because it is a different accountability—

Q26 Ian Mearns: How long will it be before you tie up the ends and formally remove the responsibility from the local authority, in terms of exerting change and securing improvement?

Elizabeth Truss: I am very clear that local authorities continue to have responsibility for the provision of children's centres and early help. Part of that—we have not discussed much of this—is better integration with local health services. That is where I think children's centres can really extend and expand their role. We have talked about reach to parents, but things like birth registration and the ability for health visitors and midwives to be based out of children's centres dramatically increase the uptake and engagement rates of parents.

Q27 Ian Mearns: Could you see, though, for one moment, how some people would view it that there is somewhat a contradiction between the roles and responsibilities and the capability for securing outcomes, in the vision that you have outlined there?

Elizabeth Truss: Local authorities have a responsibility to make sure there is high-quality provision in their area. They have an overall responsibility for the sufficiency and quality of childcare and early-years education. They can do things like use community buildings to attract high-quality private-sector providers. They could encourage schools, whether those schools are academies or whether those schools are under local authority control, to open nurseries, to open nurseries from 8 to 6 to help working parents. At the moment, far

too many school nurseries are only open from 9 to 3, which does not suit a lot of modern life. Local authorities can do all of those things.

Q28 Ian Mearns: Can you just point me to where the Government's vision on early years is actually set out?

Elizabeth Truss: We have set it out in a document, "More Great Childcare" and "More Affordable Childcare". More recently, I made a speech at Policy Exchange that outlined our vision on teaching schools in the early years and also School Direct in the early years.

Q29 Ian Mearns: Will you be updating those documents in light of recent developments and things that you have said this morning?

Elizabeth Truss: On children's centres, there is still further work to come out from Ofsted. I made an announcement last week about the inspection framework of children's centres and the fact that it is being changed, but Ofsted has not formally consulted on that yet and that will be the next step. I am very happy to send the Committee copies of those documents.

Q30 Ian Mearns: Thank you very much. Do you have a clear picture of the complexity and diversity of all the different models adopted for children's centres and could you share that picture with us?

Elizabeth Truss: It is fair to say that there are changes taking place in a lot of local authorities. A lot of local authorities are now having a more integrated approach to children's centres so, rather than operating on a stand-alone basis, they are operating as a network of children's centres. They are looking at more closely integrating them with health services locally.

I could give you lots of different examples. For example, Croydon has made their children's centres roughly coterminous with GP groups to help them link better with local services. Certainly, the discussions we have had suggest that they would welcome a change of inspection approach to inspecting on a local authority basis. Waltham Forest has also put their children's centres into clusters and has better integration with health visitors and outreach workers. Leeds has moved to a model of integrated working and information sharing, again with much closer work with the health service. The general trend is for local authorities to be operating these on a networked basis, more closely integrated with health services.

Q31 Ian Mearns: Would you share or accept our model of three distinct types of centres, or is it helpful to look at the sector in that way?

Elizabeth Truss: When you look at the actual services that children's centres are providing, the top-10 services, which I outlined earlier—so things like Stay and Play, home-based outreach services, parenting classes, parent support, resource libraries—are what the vast majority, over 90%, of children's centres do. The early education and childcare role is covered under the early-education inspections, and that will be inspected under that framework, rather than being inspected under the children's centre framework.

The core role of providing early help is what I see children's centres' core function as being. That will be outlined under the new Ofsted inspection regime. As far as early education and childcare are concerned, we see that as part of a school-led system that is inspected under the school inspection regime. For what people commonly term as "children's centres" at the moment, those are the two different ways I would see it being inspected.

Q32 Ian Mearns: There is a huge diversity in terms of what are called "children's centres" in different places, from the all-singing, all-dancing model to somebody half a day a week, with a few leaflets, handing out advice to parents. It is difficult to classify all those different things within that diversity as a children's centre, isn't it?

Elizabeth Truss: I am not sure there is evidence of that, because the latest report suggests 98% are offering Stay and Play, which is more than a leaflet. Some 95% are offering home-based services and 94% are offering outreach services. That core function of early help is being provided by the vast majority of children's centres.

A local-authority-based inspection model will solve this issue, because you will be able to see, across the local authority, if all the services that parents need are being provided. It may not be that every service is being provided in every children's centre but, provided parents know where their local children's centre is and that they can access those services, then that is what is important. What is important is the outcome for families. I am not sure that classifying the children's centres as different would help, when we are giving the overall—

Q33 Chair: You think they are pretty much the same. Having separate classifications—they are not demonstrably different; they are broadly the same.

Elizabeth Truss: Basically, yes.

Chair: Interesting.

Elizabeth Truss: The overall service of the mixture of children's centres in each local authority is quite similar, yes.

Q34 Mr Ward: Can you just clarify something, please? Just over a third of children's centres are offering some sort of on-site early education and care. We felt that that was low and, in fact, there should be a qualified teacher in every centre. Are you saying that that is not only not too low; it is much too high and really that provision should be elsewhere? There should be two separate systems here and the focus should be on parents, providing them with support, and other integration with health. That 1,200 out of 3,100 is far too high really and that provision should be elsewhere.

Elizabeth Truss: It is difficult to talk in generalities, rather than on a case-by-case basis. I gave you the example of Medlock Primary School and, in quite a lot of cases, this provision is co-located on school sites. In some cases, it can make sense for that provision to come under the auspices of the school, which is exactly what Medlock Primary has done. There are various reasons for that continuity of education.

Mr Ward: If that 1,200 was zero and that provision was elsewhere, that would be better.

Chair: No more all-singing, all-dancing nursery schools, because they would not be primary schools.

Q35 Mr Ward: It is quite expensive to do all that. Is that a policy?

Elizabeth Truss: No, it is not a policy. Some local authorities have done that. Some local authorities have focused their children's centres on early help and the early-education facilities are being run by a private or voluntary sector provider or being run by a local school. Provided the children are still getting access to that early education, it is of high quality and it is being inspected under the early-education framework, that is fine. What I support is the closer linking of those PVI providers and schools to make sure best practice is being shared and to make sure people are being properly trained throughout the system. Is it the core function of a children's centre? Does a children's centre have to do that? No, they do not. The role of children's centres is to provide early help.

Q36 Mr Raab: One of the points that we made in our previous report was around the lack of clarity for the core purpose, and you have touched on some of the issues relating to that today already. That was something that, in reaction, whether it was from Barnardo's or some of the councils, was pretty much endorsed outside Westminster. Why do you think that lack of clarity has emerged between the core purpose and what the practitioners are saying on the front line and to what extent do you think, given what you have already said, progress is being made to sharpen up its perception?

Elizabeth Truss: One of the issues has been—and this was partly a problem with the position I was in earlier this year—that the Ofsted inspection regime was not aligned to the core purpose. That has been creating confusion. The Government set out a direction about the role we see for children's centres, but the Ofsted regime, by inspecting children's centres independently of each other—so not going into a local authority and inspecting all the children's centres at the same time and seeing what the overall provision is for early help in Surrey, rather than inspecting them and looking at things like the early-education outcomes—was out of step.

That is why it is important that we are signalling that Ofsted is now moving to an inspection regime looking at children's centres as early help. Michael Wilshaw's "Annual Report" was very helpful in clarifying this for people. It is the first time that Ofsted has produced a report on early years and clarified the sheer number of schools that are providing early-years support and how the inspection regime between schools and PVI providers is going to be integrated, and then there is going to be a separate regime for children's centres. It is a lot clearer now, and local authorities are moving towards these more integrated models, more integration with the health service and more integration between the children's centres. The final piece of the jigsaw, if you like, is the Ofsted inspections reflecting that.

Q37 Mr Raab: Thank you. Just moving on from the overarching purpose to what they will actually do, you talked a bit about this in your data, which you have provided for us and gives us a flavour. Is there now an expectation that children's centres will do a core list

of functions and services, and that is something that they are expected to do, and then there will be other scalable features that will depend on the local authority, the circumstances and the need? Is that where we are going with this? If so, what are the core functions you think children's centres should always be performing?

Elizabeth Truss: This is something that Ofsted will be putting out in their consultation about the inspection. I have highlighted some of the functions that virtually all children's centres do. It would strike me as a sensible list of functions. I would like to see, and I am working with the Department of Health on, closer integration with health service functions. Some of the leading local authorities are doing that already, so having health visitors, having antenatal checks based in children's centres.

There is always a tension here. We do not want to specify it in such great detail that it stops innovation and new ways of working. Each local authority has quite different systems so, for example, some children's centres help parents with employment issues. Other children's centres provide things like sport and exercise for parents. They can do other things and we do not want to limit that list but, it seems to me, judging from the results, parents are satisfied with the services they are getting and there seems to be a set of core services that those children's centres are providing that parents feel are very useful in the early years of their children's lives.

Q38 Chair: Sir Michael Wilshaw said that both Ofsted and the Government needed to be clear about the role and function of children's centres. He would not have said that unless he thought there was an issue. There is an issue, isn't there? How do we get that clarity and how do we make sure that today's session does not send out a message of dismantling quite a lot of the work that is going on in children's centres, because it is not close to whatever this definition of help is?

Elizabeth Truss: This is why it is important to have a definition about securing the best outcomes for parents and children, which is broad and gives flexibility.

Q39 Chair: It has got vague stuff in there. The core purpose, as you know, we were pretty scathing about before and everyone else agreed. It has got stuff about raising parental aspirations—not even “expectations”, but “aspirations”. Every study I have ever seen suggests there is not a problem with aspiration as defined in that sense; it is just expectation, work ethic, understanding and navigation of the system that seems a problem, and whatever else there is. We do not have a full explanation for why so many children from poor families fail, but there is a real issue here, is there not?

Elizabeth Truss: There has been an issue with the inspection regime being out of step with the core purpose, which we are fixing.

Chair: It was all Ofsted's fault.

Elizabeth Truss: Not at all. It is simply that this is a changing landscape. The local authorities are innovating in a good way and we need to reflect that innovation. What we know is that a record number of parents and children are using children's centres. It reached a million for the first time this year, which is a great achievement.

Q40 Chair: There is a risk there that it is registration. I know there is the satisfaction rating, which is a bit more reassuring, but in order to get a tick in the box you have to get them to register. They are going out there, getting them to register and they are registering. Well done, and they are coming. Some 60% engage five or fewer occasions a year. That is shedloads of people who come, as you say, once a year. Are we seriously suggesting that is a serious intervention to tackle disadvantage and close the gap? I would suggest it is not. We are spending vast sums of money on a programme that, in all too many cases, looks like it has been hollowed out. That is the challenge. We want to make sure this is real.

Elizabeth Truss: We have to be careful not to talk down children's centres. There are a record number of parents and children using them. Some 90% of the most-in-need parents are being reached, which is a hard task actually. Just reaching them in the first place is an achievement by the children's centre, and there is an 88% satisfaction rating. These are good results.

Chair: We do not have the outcomes yet, though they superficially look good.

Elizabeth Truss: They do. There could be a lot of negative talk around children's centres that is not based on reality. Parents I meet are very satisfied with what their local children's centres are doing. The people who work in children's centres are hardworking staff, who are dedicated and believe what they are doing is valuable, rightly in my opinion, and are clear about what they are doing.

When we have had discussions with local authorities and children's centres about the new proposed inspection regime, they feel that is the right way forward and will help clarify the work they are undertaking. You have to be careful about thinking that there is a massive problem here we need to change everything to deal with when, actually, this is a popular service that increasing numbers of people are using, which they are satisfied with. Is that not something to be pleased about?

Q41 Chair: I hope so and hopefully the outcomes will show it. It is just that there are other indicators that suggest a confusion over what they do, which Michael Wilshaw has touched on, and then the core purpose. You returned to that; I cannot make sense of it and that is what we do all day. I wondered, for instance, how Ofsted is going to inspect against raising parental aspirations. How would you do that particular task?

Elizabeth Truss: They will outline this in their inspection report.

Chair: Good luck. I think they have very little chance, frankly.

Q42 Bill Esterson: Can you tell us what the balance is between what you describe as early help, child development and early education? How would you distinguish between those three?

Elizabeth Truss: "The balance in what?" is my question.

Bill Esterson: What is the appropriate contribution to addressing those three issues in children's centres or elsewhere in early-years provision?

Elizabeth Truss: I see the primary role of children's centres as providing early help to children and parents.

Q43 Bill Esterson: What does that mean?

Elizabeth Truss: That means things like advice on parenting. It means Stay and Play. It means helping parents understand how to help their child develop, those key things.

Q44 Bill Esterson: That is aimed at parents.

Elizabeth Truss: It is really focused on parents and children together. It is not focused on children primarily, whereas the role of early education and childcare is much more about directly working with children on their development and early education, which is part of an education continuum.

Q45 Bill Esterson: You see child development and early education as part of the same thing.

Elizabeth Truss: Child development is part of all education actually, not just early education. You need to understand child development right through to beyond age five, and it is a core part of the new early-years teachers' qualification and a part of the early-years educators' qualification. The role of early help is about parenting; it is about Stay and Play; it is about engaging those parents. Yes, there may be on-site childcare provision, but that is not necessarily the case. In fact, it would also be about helping those parents secure places for their children at high-quality early-education providers.

Q46 Bill Esterson: I am trying to understand and get a sense of exactly what you think should be happening here. You seem to be saying you are not concerned about where the early-years education is provided but, at children's centres, their primary role is early help. Is that fair?

Elizabeth Truss: The former point is not. The second point is fair. On the first point, what we know at the moment is that the highest-quality teacher-led early education is generally taking place in school nurseries. That is why I am keen to see school nurseries expand and I am also keen to see the practices that take place in school nurseries promulgated elsewhere as well. What we know is that it is the school-led system that is important for improving early education and childcare, so the better links to schools, the more we will see improvement. That is what I think about that.

Q47 Siobhain McDonagh: Would you mind if I asked a question? Should we change the name of children's centres to parents' advice centres?

Elizabeth Truss: Children's centres are a well known brand, for which parents understand what is being provided. They are satisfied with what is being provided and a record number of them are using it. I think it is a good brand.

Q48 Siobhain McDonagh: That is what it really is then: advice to parents.

Elizabeth Truss: Advice to parents and children are involved as well, because the number one activity at children's centres is Stay and Play, which is about the parent and the child's relationship. Some of the best children's centres, as I say, have antenatal care, postnatal

groups and birth registration, which is all about the child, but it is not about primarily early education. That is something different.

Q49 Bill Esterson: Another phrase used is “family centres”, of course, which may be the same point that Siobhain is just making.

Elizabeth Truss: Parents know what children’s centres do and are satisfied with them. Local authorities are pleased that we are working on the new Ofsted framework with Ofsted. They also know what they are doing. We are seeing increased innovation. We are seeing increased working as a network. We are seeing better integration with health services. They know what they are doing, so we have to be wary about changing something for the sake of it when actually it is working.

Q50 Bill Esterson: Coming back towards the comments that Sir Michael made, which you have mentioned a few times now, do you think that children’s centres should be measured on their contribution to education or not?

Elizabeth Truss: No.

Q51 Bill Esterson: You do not agree with his comments then about children’s centres not closing the education gap, because it is not relevant.

Elizabeth Truss: What he is saying is, if you look at where early education is taking place in England, the answer is it is primarily taking place in schools and private sector nurseries. That is where the vast majority of early education is taking place. Engaging parents from the early age of their children and working on the parental relationship is an important precursor to that early education and it is part of the continuum but, in terms of closing the gap, Sir Michael is correct. All of the evidence suggests it is high-quality teacher-led early education that closes the gap to best effect, and that is what is taking place in school nurseries and is taking place in some private nurseries, but we want it to take place in more of them.

Q52 Bill Esterson: I asked the question because the logic of what you have been saying is that it is not relevant, because that is not what you are asking children’s centres to do. The witness is nodding, for the purpose of the record. Presumably the logic of that is that you do not think there should be a link to a qualified teacher because, again, you do not think it is relevant.

Elizabeth Truss: Yes.

Q53 Chair: Just before you move on, just to remind you, Minister, of the core purpose, it is “to improve outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged...in order to reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness”. Right in the heart of the core purpose is reducing inequalities, child development and school readiness. Is that consistent with what you just said?

Elizabeth Truss: Yes, because what we are talking about here is that children’s centres are about early help. They are about helping parents with the first years of their child’s life and, hopefully, getting them in beforehand so they are getting good antenatal care, they are getting good support, they are doing birth registration. They then meet other supportive

parents in the local community. They are able to do things like Stay and Play, learn about child development, learn about reading to their child and all those important things in the early years. The children's centres are also able to point the parent and child towards high-quality early education and childcare, but they are not necessarily the main deliverers of that school readiness or the high quality. They are part of an overall mechanism. One of the problems has been that children's centres have been seen as the main deliverers. Actually, they are a facilitator of the child getting that high-quality early education that is going to help them be ready for school.

Q54 Chair: If the core purpose is “to improve outcomes for young children...in order to reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness” that does not sound like a signposting facilitator. That does sound like the central purpose is to improve outcomes for young children, so as to improve their child development and school readiness.

Elizabeth Truss: If I take you back to the example of the Medlock children's centre and school, which are linked, that children's centre will be helping parents in the very early years through parenting classes, Stay and Play, being in touch with other parents, giving advice to parents on things like Five to Thrive—read, talk, play, cuddle, respond—all of those really important early attachment development points, which are vital for children's development. They will then signpost them towards the provision in the school, which is the 15 hours at age two, 15 hours at age three and 15 hours at age four. The children's centre is responsible for making sure those children are on a path to school readiness.

Chair: Your position that you are setting out today is clear, but it is just not clear that it is compatible with the core purpose that you have given for children's centres. That is just the issue. It does not say in there, “Do not provide the education yourself.” It does not say that at all.

Q55 Mr Ward: You have mentioned that centre now three or four times. Is that a typical children's centre?

Elizabeth Truss: The Chairman asked me earlier if there is a typical children's centre. The answer is that there is not a typical children's centre, but that they can be fairly judged under a local-authority-based inspection regime. It is a very good children's centre. Is it typical? It is like asking what a typical school looks like.

Q56 Mr Ward: You seem to be picking what seems to be an extremely good example of where there is child development, but it is actually not assessed on that basis anyway.

Elizabeth Truss: What do you mean, sorry?

Mr Ward: In terms of the education attainment of the children and their preparation, you are saying that the children's centre should not be based on it. You are actually picking out one of the best examples of where there is no doubt child development and readiness for school, but you are saying that it should not actually be assessed on that basis anyway.

Elizabeth Truss: I am very happy to look at the core purpose, particularly in the light of what Ofsted put out as their inspection regime, if there is a lack of clarity.

Chair: We are making progress, Minister.

Elizabeth Truss: Good; I am pleased to hear it. The key point, though, is that we want local authorities and their associated children's centres to take responsibility for that child's journey through the system, even if they are not the primary providers at any given point in time. If that is not clear, we need to—

Q57 Chair: This does go to the heart of it. You look at Sir Michael's speech and you see what he says there about children's centres. He is saying that children's centres "are doing a valuable job, but it is a job focused on working with potentially vulnerable families to provide early social help and healthcare", which chimes very much with what you are talking about. "The proportion of children getting an early education from [children's centres] is tiny." He then goes on to say that he and the Government need to be clear about the role and function of children's centres, going forward.

As I say, if we look back at the core function, it would appear that, if you strip out the parental aspirations, esteem and other addenda that should not be in there, it is pretty clear: "to improve outcomes for...children...in order to reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness". Sir Michael says that they are not doing that, and you are saying that not only are they not doing it, but they should not and yet it is in the core of the core purpose, which you told our Committee did not need any further review, when you replied to our report, which pointed out how weak and foolish it was. "Foolish" was not what we said; I made it overly strong. We did not say it was foolish, but weak.

Elizabeth Truss: I do not think that is what it implies but, if there is evidence that it is causing confusion, I would be happy to look at it again.

Q58 Chair: I do not think it is an implication. It says what it says, and it says that the purpose is to improve outcomes for children, not to help their parents.

Elizabeth Truss: It does not mean that the children's centre has to provide that.

Q59 Chair: It says that the new core purpose for a children's centre is "to improve outcomes for young children...in order to reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness". That is exactly what it says. There is no implication in that; it says what it says, but we would be glad if you will look at it again.

Elizabeth Truss: What I am saying is that the children's centre and the local authority that is linked to the children's centre should have responsibility for making sure those children are getting access to high-quality early education. I am not saying the children's centre should necessarily be providing that early education. If there is a confusion in that, I am happy to look at it. I think, though, that we should do that in line with the Ofsted framework, which is the vital part.

Chair: He is going to write the framework looking at your core purpose on the understanding that he is given a core purpose by Government, set out, criticised by this Committee, defended by the Government. He will be working away with all these people in Ofsted, writing a framework that fits with the core purpose he has been given by

Government. It is not for him to set out a core purpose for children's centres; it is for Government. He has to then do an inspection framework that accords with what the Government says it wants from children's centres. It just turns out that what it says in your core purpose that you want them to do is not what you want them to do; you want them to do something else, which must be very confusing for inspectors and others.

Mr Ward: The difficulty is that, if a centre is assessed against a core purpose, and it is not doing the things that we have been describing, what you seem to be saying is you can turn around and say, "Actually, it is not our responsibility to do that."

Chair: We are grateful that you are going to look at that again. Bill, have you finished?

Q60 Bill Esterson: I just had one more, but it is okay to change your mind, Minister, and to recognise that evidence comes forward that enables you to change policy. The Chair was saying we would welcome that change and I hope that, when you reflect on what you have said today, you will come back and do that.

Elizabeth Truss: I will certainly look at the core purpose, particularly when we put out the Ofsted framework, to make sure it is clear, if that is not clear at the moment.

Q61 Pat Glass: Minister, can we look at the issue of nursery schools? Ofsted has told us and everyone else that looking only at the overall judgments given, nursery schools outperform any other type of early-years provision. Some 96% of them are currently good or outstanding, and many of them are at the top end of good or outstanding, and yet the Government has taken away the presumption against closure and has not agreed with us that funding should consider DSG as opposed to the Single Funding Formula. That is now placing many of these outstanding provisions, which everyone including Ofsted recognise as the best in early-years provision, facing imminent closure. Why do you not agree with us that the Government should reinstate the presumption against closure and fund through the DSG, which would secure the future for these excellent provisions?

Elizabeth Truss: The problem with that analysis is that it does not include school nurseries and this is a historic issue. Ofsted is consulting at the moment on reintroducing the early-years judgment for schools but, previously, there has not been an early years-judgment for schools, so we have not been able to compare school nurseries with maintained nursery schools, and there are vastly more school nurseries than maintained nursery schools.

All the evidence we have about staff qualification levels is that they are higher in school nurseries than they are in maintained nursery schools. Now, I would say that they are only slightly higher and it is no doubt true that maintained nursery schools are doing a very good job overall, but it is worth bearing in mind that 49 local authorities do not have any maintained nursery schools at all, that 81 local authorities have between one and five maintained nursery schools and that only five local authorities have over 10 maintained nursery schools. If we were to have a national policy that gave a disproportionate amount of funding to nursery schools, we would be disadvantaging the majority of local authorities.

Q62 Pat Glass: Minister, you say that you do not have a judgment on nurseries within primary schools. Is it your intention that we should have? Have I missed that this morning? There have been a lot of words, so I might have missed it.

Elizabeth Truss: Ofsted will be reporting on that soon.

Q63 Pat Glass: Given that, are we really in the business of closing the best of our schools? While we wait for a judgment on nursery classes in primary schools, these nursery schools are in imminent danger of closure.

Elizabeth Truss: The Government is not in the business of closing anything. This is a local authority responsibility. Can we just be absolutely clear about the numbers here? There are 16,339 school nurseries. There are 418 nursery schools. There are vastly more school nurseries than nursery schools, and there are an awful lot of authorities with no nursery schools at all. Do I support high-quality teacher-led provision wherever it is? Absolutely. If it is in a maintained nursery school, that is great. If it is in a school nursery, that is great. If it is in a private-sector-provided nursery, that is great too. To say that those nursery schools, the 418, are better than the 16,000 school nursery classes, we do not have any evidence that that is true. In fact, all the evidence we have is actually that the school nurseries have more qualified staff, albeit marginally.

Q64 Chair: Some 96% of them are unlikely to be good or outstanding, though, unlike nursery schools. This Government is not always obsessed by qualifications; they are more interested in outcomes. It is unusual to have a Minister making the qualification level trump outcomes of quality.

Elizabeth Truss: It is simply because we just do not have outcome judgments at the moment for those 16,000.

Q65 Chair: We do at 96%. We know about schools and we know that 96% of schools are not good or outstanding. Sorry, Pat. They are pretty good is all I am saying. It is pretty unlikely that the school nursery provision is better than 96% outstanding. They will be doing well to be better than that, won't they?

Elizabeth Truss: Maintained nursery schools are very good provision. There is no doubt about that; all the evidence suggests that. They are a small proportion of the total number of teacher-led nurseries, a very small proportion. Would it be fair on the 49 local authorities that do not have any maintained nursery schools and the 81 local authorities that have between one and five, for historical reasons? Bear in mind that maintained nursery schools were often set up during the war to help women who worked in the war effort, so they are in particular locations because of things like munitions factories. There are plenty of disadvantaged local authorities that do not have any maintained nursery schools, for historical reasons.

Of course, we want local authorities to work with high-quality providers to make sure that they are spreading their expertise. There are some fantastic examples, for example in Bristol, where maintained nursery schools are linked to local schools and are linked to private-sector providers in a teaching school arrangement, so that they can share their best practice. That is what good local authorities are doing; they are making sure that they get full use of the expertise in maintained nursery schools. I ask you, if the 49 local

authorities that do not have maintained nursery schools, which are often in very deprived areas, would be happy if we gave extra funds to 418 schools, when the 16,000 that are essentially providing a similar type of provision would not get any extra funding. Is that fair?

Q66 Pat Glass: Can I say, Minister, that if 49 local authorities do not have any then approximately 100 do, which makes two thirds of local authorities that have at least one nursery school? We know that these are very good and outstanding provision. We made a suggestion and a recommendation in our report that, while the Government does nothing, these are withering on the vine, and that, in order to prevent good schools closing, which is what the Government says it is about, you look at reinstating the presumption against closure, funding it through the DSG and looking at putting it at the centre of early-years teaching centres. I understand that will not be possible in every location, but surely to do nothing is to let these provisions, which are excellent, wither on the vine.

Elizabeth Truss: Are you saying we should take money away from other—?

Pat Glass: It is not my job to answer questions, Minister; it is yours.

Elizabeth Truss: Are you suggesting taking money away from other school nurseries? Some local authorities have over 10. Some 81 have only between one and five nursery schools. Only five local authorities have over 10.

Q67 Chair: You have already given us those figures. You have emphasised how few they are in number. We have emphasised how excellent they are in quality. Given that they are few in number but excellent, it would not cost a vast amount of money to ensure that they were not closed in a system that seemed to be blind to their quality and to ignore their existence. That is all we were putting.

I do not think you would have the rest of the country up in arms because for the 400-odd, compared to the 16,000-odd, that presumption was reinstated to ensure that they were not just inadvertently shut, the complex practice that has been developed there, the integration of various skills and services that delivers an outstanding service, is not just lost and thrown away and people do not end up doing something else. That is all we are saying and we ask you to reflect on it.

Elizabeth Truss: Mr Chairman, I would like to respond to that point. Within that 16,000, there are some examples of fantastic practice. Why should it be the case that, because they are called maintained nursery schools, those ones get extra money whereas the ones within that 16,000 would not get extra money? That is not equitable.

What we are doing as a Government is putting in place the Early Years Pupil Premium to make sure that three and four-year-olds from deprived backgrounds get extra funding, so that they can have teacher-led care. I want teacher-led care in whichever nursery is best placed to provide it, and I think it would be invidious of the Government to pick out particular schools that are there for historical reasons, rather than school nurseries in other areas that just do not happen to have maintained nursery schools, which are providing similarly high-quality provision.

I have been to maintained nursery schools and I have been to school nurseries. I can absolutely agree that both of them are providing high-quality provision. I think it would be invidious to pick out one just because of the structure that it is in. Absolutely, we need to look more at how we integrate and how we help local authorities integrate maintained nursery schools into their provision so that we do not lose that expertise, but the idea of differential funding is wrong. It really is wrong.

Q68 Bill Esterson: You do that in free schools; you provide differential funding for free schools. Some £400 million went to the basic-need budget to free schools. That is differential funding. Why do you do it in one sector and not another?

Pat Glass: Minister, we are asking not for differential funding; we are asking for the same funding, funded in the same way, through the DSG. That is where the primary schools are funded through.

Elizabeth Truss: They are funded at the same level. In fact, the local authorities I have spoken to with maintained nursery schools generally fund them at a higher rate than they do the local primary school nursery classes. I can tell you some of the primary school nursery classes are not very happy about that. That is a decision, by the way, for the local authority rather than central Government. My concern is, in this whole debate about early education, school nurseries, which provide a huge amount of high-quality early education, are virtually never mentioned. They are just not mentioned. The recommendations have been focused on 418 nursery schools.

Chair: Let us not reiterate that. We have asked you to think again. You have said you think it would be invidious, so we will not hold out too much hope and I will move on to Neil.

Q69 Neil Carmichael: Thank you, Graham. Good morning, Minister. You have mentioned the important role of local authorities in this whole question, but of course two problems arise. One is whether we are sure that local authorities are all good enough to do the job and, secondly, we have a wide range of providers as well as local authorities, and obviously we have heard about those in the course of this morning as well. In answer to that particular conundrum, we came up with the idea of national outcomes framework. You did not agree, so how can we be sure that children's centres are actually reaching the appropriate standards?

Elizabeth Truss: This is back to the question about the core purpose and the Ofsted inspection regime. When Ofsted releases its consultation on the inspection regime, that is when we can have that discussion about what is realistic to ask children's centres and local authorities to do.

Q70 Neil Carmichael: You are not ruling out some sort of national outcome strategy in the future.

Elizabeth Truss: I would be reluctant to be more prescriptive. As I say, what we are seeing are some very interesting innovations at a local authority level. We are seeing closer work with the health service. We are seeing a high number of parents reached by children's centres. What we would all commonly understand to be the core purpose of

children's centres, so for example parenting classes and Stay and Play, we are seeing most children's centres providing. I am reluctant to try to prescribe on top of a model that seems to be working and which actually, according to Ofsted's latest judgment, seems to be improving. There is a danger of over-prescription here, when we do need to allow for flexibility.

We have talked about the different structures. Some local authorities have huge numbers of school nurseries. Some have maintained nursery schools. Some have a big PVI sector. Other local authorities have children's centres configured in one way or the other. There is a danger about setting a national outcomes framework. What we need is better information at a local level. I have said before that we do not have sufficient information about the outcomes of children's centres. We are going to get that in May next year. That would be a good point at which to look at it again and see if they are achieving the outcomes that we want. The problem is that children's centres were set up with a large amount of public money, without the proper evaluation taking place of what was working and what was not working. We have now put that in place and we need to wait to see the results of that.

Q71 Neil Carmichael: Thanks. Now, when we launched our inquiry, we heard a lot of evidence. Much of that focused on the fact that a large number of children's centres were using Early Years Foundation Stage Profiles to effectively judge their own performance. Those are no longer compulsory in primary schools, so the question arises: how should children's centres assess their own performance?

Elizabeth Truss: This is back to the question about to what extent children's centres can be held to account for school readiness essentially. This is where the local authority does come in, because local authorities are responsible for making sure there is high-quality provision of early education and childcare in their area. We have the new baseline assessment coming in, which will look at the cohorts for children. Children will either be using the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile or they will be using that cohort data on baseline.

That will be a way of looking at local authorities and seeing—and that is an analysis Ofsted has to do—when they have achieved good results, what has gone right, and, where they are not achieving the results, where the problem is in the system. Is it that parents and children are not engaging early on? Is it that the quality of early education is not good enough? Is it that provision is patchy across the borough? Those are the kinds of things that they can then look at, but we are not yet at that stage of having all the data. For example, we have the two-and-a-half-year check, which we are working on at the moment with the Department of Health, and we have what would be the baseline cohort assessment coming in, in due course, but we are not yet there on those outcome measures.

Q72 Neil Carmichael: In short, once all that data is available, you would expect either the local authority or Ofsted, or indeed both, to interrogate that data, as appropriate.

Elizabeth Truss: Yes.

Q73 Caroline Nokes: We know that the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has identified a gap in the evidence of what works in early years interventions.

Can you tell us what discussions you have had with them on the need to develop and test different ways of delivering services through children's centres?

Elizabeth Truss: We have had an inter-ministerial meeting with the taskforce.

Chair: That sounds very exciting.

Elizabeth Truss: It was extremely exciting. The evidence we are collecting at the moment on children's centres is important, which is due to report next year. The other thing we are working on is an international study. Basically, it is a Durham PIPS test, but an international version, the iPIPS. We are also working with the Early Intervention Foundation on getting better evidence of best practice in children's centres across their network.

We do have good evidence on early education and what works in early education, through the EPPE study and also through the recent Oxford study, which does show the importance of teacher-led activities and high-quality teacher-led activities, hence our focus on early-years teachers, how we get more of them into the profession and how we attract the brightest graduates into early years. We do know that works. On the children's centre side, we are still waiting for the data to come out next year, and we are also working with the Early Intervention Foundation on that.

Q74 Caroline Nokes: You have mentioned several times already this morning the importance of parental engagement and narrowing the gap in attainment, so are you going to accept the Committee's recommendation to fund research into parental engagement and how to narrow that gap?

Elizabeth Truss: That is an interesting question. It is something that we have discussed with the Early Intervention Foundation, but we do not have any specific plans or recommendations on that. That is certainly something I will look at.

Q75 Alex Cunningham: Can I just come back to you on your previous question? You talked about attracting graduates into the setting, and yet the Government rejected the two recommendations of the Nutbrown review to have a graduate in every setting and to have a qualified Level 3 workforce. How are you going to do that if you do not have the pay, condition and structures within the profession? How are you going to attract these graduates in to do these jobs?

Elizabeth Truss: We do know that graduates are being attracted in. We have seen a 25% increase last year. We do not want to specify the Level 3 qualification, because the nursery itself has to make sure it has a good complement of staff. What we are concerned about is, if we specify one level of qualification, whether that is actually going to make it harder to find the available funds to recruit a graduate into the nursery.

What I would say is that Ofsted is now reporting on the level of qualifications of staff in nurseries. The approach is very much focused on outcomes, as it is in schools. We do not actually have any requirements in schools, or not all schools anyway, about teacher-led but we do want to see more teacher-led classes. We think that has to be assessed through outcomes rather than imposing a particular structure on nurseries.

Q76 Alex Cunningham: You do not think the Government ought to have a proper career pay and reward structure for people within the children's services area.

Elizabeth Truss: I do not see it as a children's services area; I see it as an education system. It should be part of the education system. What we want to get to, and I acknowledge we are not there yet and that is something we are working on in the Department for Education, is we want to see a 2-to-18 teaching profession or a 0-to-18 teaching profession, which is properly rewarded across the board, has the relevant flexibilities and the relevant professional status, but we are not there yet.

Q77 Caroline Nokes: What role do you see for early-years teaching centres and teaching schools in leading improvement in children's centres?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not see them leading improvement in children's centres, because I see children's centres as focused on early help. Teaching schools are very important in early years. We have just announced that we are going to have more teaching schools in early years. We have also announced School Direct is going to be working in the early years and the Bright Horizons private-sector nursery group is taking part in that as well, so we see it as working across the maintained sector and the private sector, as well as academies and free schools.

We are seeing a lot of good local partnerships emerging. I mentioned the one in Bristol, which involves their maintained nursery schools. We are seeing an expansion in teaching schools, but I do see a school-led system as the way that we are going to see quality improve across the board, as part of an overall education system. Rather than seeing early years as part of children's services, it should be seen as part of the education system.

Q78 Neil Carmichael: Governance has been a big issue lately and one that this Committee has considered carefully. We did in the context of our discussion on children's centres, because we were all thinking that we should have a more orthodox governance structure for children's centres but, again, this was not accepted by the Government. Why not?

Elizabeth Truss: Children's centres are very different in terms of structure from schools. Schools are essentially more autonomous, hence we are talking about the school-led system, whereas the direction we are moving in, in children's centres, is actually towards more of a cross-local-authority approach, where local authorities are held to account for the performance of their children's centres, rather than being independent entities or providing their own services. That is the explanation for the difference in approach.

Q79 Neil Carmichael: Essentially, you are expecting local authorities to do all the probing, testing and checking.

Elizabeth Truss: Yes.

Q80 Neil Carmichael: Finally, regarding your own role and the role of the Department for Education, it is effectively a next-step operation because you are looking at the local authorities to effectively deliver and account for what is delivered. Do you see your role primarily as a kind of promoter and champion of good practice?

Elizabeth Truss: I see my role as setting the framework and obviously working with the Department of Health on that. The fact is that the funding for children's centres comes through the Early Intervention Grant, which is through the DCLG, so it is primarily a role of local government. If you look at the funding mechanisms, it is quite instructive. The funding for the two, three and four-year-old programme goes through the Direct Schools Grant. It is a core education function, whereas the money for children's centres, which goes through the Department for Local Government, is deliberately a local government function, which has elements of health provision and elements of education provision in it.

Chair: We have limited time and quite a lot to get through. If we can keep it short and sharp, Committee, we will get through.

Q81 Bill Esterson: You mentioned the Early Intervention Grant. Now, Policy Exchange estimates that spending on children's centres will fall to around £854 million, which is a reduction of 28% from 2010. The Early Intervention Grant has seen a 15% cut. The two presumably are directly linked. Do you think that this will lead to a loss of large parts of the network?

Elizabeth Truss: I have to say those numbers do not accord with the figures that I have.

Q82 Bill Esterson: The Policy Exchange numbers I am sure you will have seen, because you have done work with them, but the Early Intervention Grant figures come from the DfE.

Elizabeth Truss: Can you give me the absolute numbers?

Bill Esterson: The DfE told us that the Early Intervention Grant was £2,074 million in 2012-13 and will be £1,709 million from 2013-14, so that is a 15% fall.

Elizabeth Truss: The figures I have suggest that early intervention funding is rising from £2.2 billion in 2011 to £2.5 billion in 2014-15.

Bill Esterson: That includes the two-year-old offer. Your own Department said the Early Intervention Grant itself shows a fall of 15%, which are the figures I have just cited. Do you accept that figure?

Elizabeth Truss: I need to double-check that one. It is somewhere here in my file.

Q83 Bill Esterson: Assuming your own Department was right in the figures they gave us, do you see that that has led and will continue to lead to closures throughout the network?

Elizabeth Truss: What we are seeing in terms of the network is a pretty steady state. We have 3,550 children's centres and additional sites. Since 2010, only 76 centres have closed and six new centres have opened, because what local authorities are doing is they are getting efficiency through back office reform. They are operating centres as much more of a network. They are integrating them with local health services. What we know is that more and more parents and children are actually using the centres. Tales of the network diminishing greatly are simply not true; they are not borne out by the evidence.

Bill Esterson: Only 76 centres have closed.

Elizabeth Truss: Yes.

Q84 Bill Esterson: You have given different figures from that in Parliamentary answers, haven't you?

Elizabeth Truss: No, I do not think so.

Q85 Bill Esterson: Your colleagues have. The figures we have been given suggest a much higher level of closure. I am waiting patiently while perhaps somebody can point out what the figures are that we have been given, but I know that they are much higher.

Elizabeth Truss: Let us be clear: there are 3,019 main children's centres and a further 531 additional sites, which are still open to families and children, but the point is they are part of a network; they are not a main children's centre. From the experience of parents and children walking into a children's centre, only 76 have closed across the country and six new centres have opened.

Q86 Bill Esterson: I am sure we will return to those figures. The amount of money that I quoted, which you have not been able to confirm so far, if that is true, that does imply a loss of service, doesn't it?

Elizabeth Truss: What it implies is that local authorities are getting better value for what they are providing. We are seeing very high levels of parents using children's centres. We are seeing high levels of satisfaction. We are seeing children's centres being managed as a group much more. I gave you some examples earlier of Croydon, Waltham Forest and Leeds. Hampshire is also working in a cluster model. Ealing is working in a cluster model. What these children's centres are doing is, rather than operating them separately, they are getting efficiency savings through better management. I think that is a good thing. If we look at what parents are saying about children's centres and the fact that 96% of them or 98% of them are delivering some of those core services, it does not suggest a doom-and-gloom story at all.

Q87 Chair: Which get better Ofsted judgments: the individual single centres or the groups?

Elizabeth Truss: The recent Ofsted study showed that the inspection outcomes of groups were improving.

Chair: Which gets better: single children's centres or groups of them networked?

Elizabeth Truss: All I can tell you is that 54% of groups were rated as good and outstanding over the last period, against 47% of single centres over the same period, so the groups are being rated higher than the single centres.

Q88 Chair: The "Early Years Annual Report" said fewer of these groups have been judged good or outstanding.

Elizabeth Truss: I am giving you the latest up-to-date figures, Mr Chairman. What we are finding is that, as local authorities have reconfigured and as these groups start working effectively, we are seeing an improvement in results, which is a good thing.

Q89 Bill Esterson: When can nurseries and children's centres expect to hear more from you about the Early Years Pupil Premium? Are you open to the suggestion—given the conversation we have had already, I think you might not be—that you should direct the additional money to children's centres to target early language communication and social development?

Elizabeth Truss: The Pupil Premium is for three and four-year-olds, and we will be shortly announcing or running a consultation on how that will be administered. Any nursery or child-minder that has three and four-year-olds who are eligible will be—

Q90 Bill Esterson: I am assuming from what you said earlier that you will not be targeting it at children's centres.

Elizabeth Truss: If a children's centre continues to provide a nursery, which some do, the point is that it will be inspected under the early-years framework rather than a children's centre framework. Does that make sense?

Q91 Bill Esterson: You have replaced the confusion in my mind that I thought you had dispelled earlier, but never mind.

Elizabeth Truss: Can I just try to clarify that then?

Q92 Bill Esterson: I thought you did not want to see children's centres running education.

Elizabeth Truss: It is not that I do not want to see children's centres running nurseries. It is just that they do not necessarily have to.

Q93 Chair: It is not their core purpose, even if that is what the core purpose says, but that is going to be looked at. I think it is clear—confused but clear.

Elizabeth Truss: The point is that I do not want to preclude children's centres running nurseries and, in that case, they would be receiving or they may be receiving the Pupil Premium, if that makes sense, but that is not their core purpose.

Q94 Craig Whittaker: I just want to briefly ask you about commissioning for stability. Voluntary Action Calderdale, as well as other third-sector voluntary organisations, feels excluded from being able to tender for some of the contracts, because of the short-termness around those contracts, often only two years. They say very clearly that “We just can't even cover off our start-up costs if there is a two-year funding agreement.” What can you do to try to encourage local authorities to extend these contracts, which give a much wider field to tender for the contracts?

Elizabeth Truss: This partly comes down to the way Ofsted will be looking at local authorities and the way they behave, in terms of securing the best outcomes for children and parents. If it is the case that offering contracts on a short term is not getting the value for children and parents, then that is something Ofsted will look at but, ultimately, it is a

decision for local authorities. Local authorities have to make sure that they are the best possible providers, whether it is in house or whether it is one of the organisations you have mentioned. They have to make sure they are the best possible providers providing that service.

Q95 Craig Whittaker: There is very clear evidence, just in the Calder Valley alone, that actually the range of providers is being excluded because of short-termness around these contracts being offered. Are you therefore saying that you are going to facilitate via Ofsted to make sure that the commissioning timescale is going to be looked at in that framework to encourage them?

Elizabeth Truss: Are you saying there is something central Government is doing that is making them do that?

Q96 Craig Whittaker: No, I am not saying that. I am asking you what you are doing about it to ensure we get a wide range of providers able to tender for these contracts, which are currently only being offered in the short term.

Elizabeth Truss: My approach is, and Ofsted's approach is, we should look at outcomes rather than telling local authorities how to do their contracting. If local authorities' actions are resulting in them not getting the best possible provider then they, as local authorities, need to look at that. It is a matter for the local authority, rather than a matter for the Department for Education.

Q97 Chair: Can we ask you to look at it? It seems to be quite common. Imagine commissioning someone to run a primary school for two years. You would struggle to get people in. Even if you did get them in—

Elizabeth Truss: I would need to understand why they are doing that.

Chair: That is what we are asking you to look at. It appears to be an issue.

Elizabeth Truss: I will look at that.

Chair: There is not only the issue of people being excluded. It is the fact that we have had evidence suggesting people who are doing it are unable to invest for the long term, embed the good practice and think long term, because they only have a two-year contract. How can they spend money that is not going to bear fruit until after they may, indeed have, lost the contract? They cannot do it, so it leads to a waste of public money and a weakness in the quality of provision, because of the way the contracting works. We do not claim to understand what the drivers are, but we would like to ask you to look into it, please. Thank you.

Q98 Pat Glass: We have heard an awful lot about local authorities this morning. One of the recommendations that we made in our report was that there should be a stronger accountability system for local authorities in relation to children's services. You did not just reject our view on that, but also that of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, so is that something else that you would be prepared to look at or is it simply going to take place as part of the Ofsted framework?

Elizabeth Truss: This is exactly that which, because we were still in discussions with Ofsted, I could not really talk about when I responded to your report. Absolutely, that is the intention of changing the Ofsted framework: to put the accountability more on local authorities, rather than individual children's centres, which may be providing part of the network or part of the service, but do not see the totality.

Q99 Pat Glass: Can I ask you a little bit about the detail of that? I do not know whether you are able to tell us yet. At the moment, if a school in a local authority has some adverse comments on an Ofsted report or an unsatisfactory, then things happen in the local authority. If the same thing happens in relation to a children's centre, people shrug and there is not the same kind of urgency around it. What is there going to be in the Ofsted framework that is going to be make local authorities sit up and take notice?

Elizabeth Truss: It is slightly difficult for me to go into any more detail than I did in my announcement last week, because Ofsted has not yet released their consultation on the approach to children's centres. Suffice it to say, Ofsted will look at children's centres in a local authority area in the round, so they will be looking at issues like the commissioning and those kinds of things much more.

Q100 Chair: You take on board Pat's point, which is about not only that they come to a judgment but, when they do come to that judgment, it is going to get escalated to the top of the council in the same way that it does if a school is found to be failing. If early intervention is important, we need it to have the same traction.

Elizabeth Truss: Exactly, I will take a look at that. As I say, we are still finalising with Ofsted the details.

Q101 Ian Mearns: Minister, could you update the Committee on progress in implementing Jean Gross's report on information sharing? In particular, when can we expect to see an e-learning module on information sharing in the early years?

Elizabeth Truss: We have given very clear guidance for children's centres that health services and local authorities should share information, such as live birth data, with children's centres on a regular basis. A lot of the barriers that Jean Gross identified are linked to professional practice and culture, rather than to any specific regulations in place. We have some good examples of case studies for Leeds and Hampshire, which I have mentioned already, where they are sharing health and maternity services delivered out of the children's centres and they have a protocol that has already been developed. What we want to see is more of that practice taking place at a local level. I will have to come back to you on that e-learning module issue.

Q102 Ian Mearns: That is two down and 149 to go or something, is it?

Elizabeth Truss: Those are just two good examples of it happening. We are working with our strategic partner for children on disseminating that more widely, but what the report did identify is a lot of the issue is cultural rather than anything else. Some of these things like the development of health and wellbeing boards, the integrated review, which we are working on with the Department of Health, are all going to help better information sharing.

Q103 Chair: She also specifically recommended an audit, did she not, which in your response to her report you did not mention? As you say, it is cultural; there are all sorts of issues; you are taking steps. You need to find out whether it happens or not because, if it does not, if you do not do an audit and find out, you can always find good practice but, if there is bad practice continuing, you will only find that out by an audit, which can then trigger further action. Would you consider doing an audit, as she suggested?

Elizabeth Truss: We will consider that. What I would also say is this is an interesting issue for the inspection regime, potentially.

Q104 Ian Mearns: Minister, will you revise your statutory guidance to make it clear to local authorities that there should be clear responsibility for building relations between social services and children's centres, so that action can be taken quickly where necessary, even where the named social worker model is not adopted?

Elizabeth Truss: I will have to get back to you on that one, I am afraid.

Q105 Chair: Maintained nursery schools achieve the best outcomes for the poorest children, as we have talked about. They employ teachers with QTS. They are more expensive, but they may well offer better value for money for the taxpayer than continued investment in nurseries and children's centres that do not improve, yet funded two-year-olds are being placed in settings judged less than good without teachers. Are you sure the Government has got its priorities right?

Elizabeth Truss: Some 90% of two-year-olds in the programme are in good and outstanding nurseries. We have had the discussion about maintained nursery schools. As I said, there are 16,000 school nurseries out there, many of which are also doing a fantastic job. They often seem to be the unseen part of early years. I am pleased that Michael Wilshaw is bringing everything under the same framework, so we can actually look at where the most impact of teacher-led classes is. I agree with what you are saying about teacher-led provision, but we need to see that across the board, not just in the 418 maintained nursery schools or the 16,000 school nursery classes, but also in the 25,000 PVI providers. What we need to make sure is that funding flows in that way.

Q106 Chair: Just to go to this issue around schools, which you make obviously a big focus on, are you comfortable that schools are the right environment for two-year-olds to spend their time, from breakfast to bedtime?

Elizabeth Truss: We have been piloting our two-year-old programme in schools with 49 schools, and I have to say it has been a runaway success, heavily over-subscribed by parents, very positive feedback. I refer back to Margaret Hodge's comments really that parents feel it is part of the community and it is part of the education continuum. Of course, children are not studying trigonometry at age two.

Chair: That is because you are not the headteacher.

Elizabeth Truss: They are doing things like playing with water and counting bricks, and all the things you would expect in a high-quality nursery. We have had school nurseries since the 1800s. It is nothing new. What is relatively new is that two-year-olds are in the

nurseries, but we now have 45,000 age-two children receiving education and care in maintained schools. There are quite a sizeable number of children receiving that.

Lots of private sector nurseries operate between the hours of 8 to 6, and they operate between the hours of 8 to 6 for babies. That is a choice that parents have about how they want to have their children looked after, how they want to manage their lives. Obviously, some people prefer home-based care, which is why we are developing things like childminder agencies. Other people feel a nursery is right for their child but, provided the quality of care is good, what is the difference really between being in a school nursery during those hours vis-à-vis a private sector nursery? The important thing is that there are loving people looking after that child and helping them with those core areas of development.

One of the points I just want to make about school nurseries is that I am keen to see them open from 8 to 6. That does not mean that children have to be there from 8 to 6. It is about flexibility in the way that children can take their hours because, at the moment, quite often or most of the time in school nurseries, the hours offered are 9 to 12 and 12 to 3, which is really inconvenient for a lot of working parents. We want to see more school nurseries offer five-hour blocks, so that it can be compatible with a part-time job, so they can have three lots of five hours a week. That is what we want to see from school nurseries; we want to see the flexibility.

Some of these school nurseries and maintained nurseries do have very high-quality early education, but often it is difficult for parents who are working to access that, because they are not able to meet the pick-up and drop-off times. There is a role for schools and for maintained nursery schools to work with the way we all live now and the way parents need that care to be provided.

Q107 Siobhain McDonagh: If Sure Start or children's centres are not about providing nursery provision or education, the importance of health advice and support comes into focus, so what you have been doing with your colleagues in the Department of Health to promote the role of children's centres in health services? Have you discussed encouraging the siting of primary healthcare services, such as health visiting and midwifery, in children's centres?

Elizabeth Truss: Yes, we are very supportive of that and there is a lot of evidence that it is a great way of making sure parents are accessing the services. It provides a continuum. We are seeing growing examples of this happening at a local level. I went to see a children's centre in Watford recently where that is taking place and parents are receiving a full service, from antenatal care right through to postnatal care and Stay and Play.

There are still issues to be ironed out on things like the integrated check and how we make sure that is fully integrated. We are doing a lot of work also making sure that health visitors are promoting things like the two-year-old early education programme, so we have more feedback between health and education. As I said in my response about the Jean Gross information sharing, there is sometimes a cultural barrier to overcome, and we are working with Department of Health colleagues on that as well.

Q108 Siobhain McDonagh: Does the changing pattern of centres and the uncertainty over their future mean that health services are often reluctant to get involved?

Elizabeth Truss: I think health services are becoming more involved in children's centres and we are seeing more examples of health visitors. For example in Manchester, there is a lot of work in engaging hard-to-reach parents working with health visitors. At the Benchill Children's Centre in Wythenshawe, the birth registration service is felt to be the main reason why they are reaching hard-to-reach families. They have a re-engagement rate of nearly 90%. They have health visitors who work flexibly across the city's children's centres. Generally speaking, local authorities are very committed to children's centres and want to deliver great services through children's centres. They are working with local health services on that.

I do not think there is uncertainty around children's centres. As I say, we have seen stability in numbers, actually, over the past four years, despite what various press reports might say. We have seen an increasing number of parents using children's centres and we are seeing very positive outcomes, in terms of parent satisfaction for children's centres, so I think health visitors and the health service can have every confidence that these are a strong part of our early-help system that will continue.

Q109 Chair: Is Ofsted wrong to say children's centres are "characterised by turbulence and volatility"?

Elizabeth Truss: We have been through a period where local authorities have been reconfiguring their children's centres. I have just given you some examples of local authorities that have done that. Obviously, when services are being reconfigured, there can be concerns by people working in the services, by the local community, about what to expect, but what we are seeing now is that the Ofsted results, albeit under the existing framework—not under our new framework—in terms of outcomes are actually improving for those groups of centres. Yes, there has been a period of change.

Chair: Turbulence and volatility?

Elizabeth Truss: I would describe it as change. There has been a period of change, where local authorities are making sure that those networks of children's centres are well managed, but we have seen stability in terms of the number of children's centres that are open to children and parents. We have seen an increased number of parents using them.

Chair: Let us not repeat facts we have already heard clearly before.

Q110 Siobhain McDonagh: What contribution should children's centres be making to reducing the risk factors associated with infant mortality? Are children's centres making a contribution to closing the gap in health outcomes between children from deprived backgrounds and the general population?

Elizabeth Truss: That is an interesting question. It is something I do not have. I have details at the moment in terms of what services are being provided; the outcomes of the services are less clear. That is something I hope we will see next year, when we get a report on the outcomes, so I cannot really say any more about that.

Q111 Pat Glass: Can I ask you about childminders in schools? Some children will move between two or three placements in the space of two years—childminders to nursery to

children's centre to schools. What schools, nurseries, etc., were telling us was that the information each of those placements get is not being passed on or is not being passed on well enough. We asked if the Department would look at this and issue clearer guidance. The response was to tell us about one school where it is going well, but that is not what schools are telling us, so would you look again at the guidance to make sure that this is rich information about children going between two or three placements? Get one of your 40 people in your early-years department just to look at it. We have Jean Gross's stuff. We have got the one school that you mentioned. Just have a look at the guidance again, because schools are telling us that this is not happening.

Elizabeth Truss: I am happy to look at it. I am going to give you an example, though, I am afraid. This is to do with the childminder agencies, which will open fully from this September. One example is the St Bede Academy in Bolton, which is going to be opening a childminder agency. They are already working with local childminders.

What we want to do through these much better links between schools, private sector nurseries and childminders is to provide a much more integrated service for parents. In this particular case, the school actually will be working with childminders for pick-up and drop-off for children, as well as after-school care, but those childminders are also being offered opportunities to work in the school nursery as well, during the day. There is a lot of opportunity for much less fragmentation in early years to see a lot of these institutions working better together, but our focus is centring that on the leadership of schools, which we think are respected institutions in the community and maybe information sharing. I do take your point and I will look at that; information sharing can be part of that.

Q112 Pat Glass: I just have one more question. I accept that, but each school finding its salvation in its own way is not ideal, is it? I am chairing a parliamentary inquiry at the moment looking at childminding for disabled children, and we know that the situation is so much more difficult there, where parents are paying eight times more for childminding if they can get it and many of them cannot get it. David is on that with me and Alex. I cannot believe that the stories we hear are typical. I really refuse to believe that the stories are typical, but they are awful to listen to. Parents are at risk of losing their homes, certainly of not being able to work. Will you look at the issue around childcare, and certainly look at our report when it comes out about childcare for disabled children, which is a much worse situation?

Elizabeth Truss: Yes.

Q113 Alex Cunningham: Minister, you failed to address our recommendation 31 on the pay and status of the workforce. Is it really enough for the Government to pass the buck and the responsibility to providers of local authorities to address this?

Elizabeth Truss: This goes back really to what we are looking at in terms of our teaching reforms and creating much more sense of a cohesive teaching profession, which also includes early-years teachers. As I say, we set out the direction of travel, but we do want teachers to be seen on an equal basis with each other, regardless of whether they are teaching and working with a two-year-old as a 16-year-old. We are not there yet; we will be saying further things on that subject in due course. I understand it is an issue. Where we have a situation where a lot of private-sector providers will tell you it is difficult to recruit a teacher or it is too expensive to recruit a teacher, we are doing what we can to

provide case studies of how you can make teacher leadership work in a private sector setting, how you can make that financially viable. We are giving that help and advice, but it is a gradual process.

Q114 Alex Cunningham: Inequality of pay is a major issue. There is no doubt about that and clearly you recognise that it is a major issue. You did say recently, “A teacher is a teacher—regardless of whether they are teaching a 14-year-old the cosine rule or helping a three-year-old speak in full sentences.” Do you really think that is true when you can have a teacher who does not have Qualified Teacher Status, who can expect to earn 50% less than a qualified teacher?

Elizabeth Truss: That is a situation and obviously we are looking at overall reforms to teaching across the board. What I was saying in my statement is that I think it should be the case that, as a society, we value those two types of teachers equally. Clearly, at the moment, pay in the early years is lower than it is in comparable countries. We are trying to rectify that with early-years teachers. That is a stepping stone to having a fully cohesive teacher workforce, but I recognise that is an issue and we are working on how to sort it out.

Q115 Alex Cunningham: That is great news, because you seem to be committed to the idea of some form of equality in terms of pay and conditions for people who are dealing with the youngest children and into early years.

Elizabeth Truss: What I am saying is I think they should be respected on an equal basis and we are looking at all those issues.

Q116 Alex Cunningham: Respect includes pay, I would suggest. Some jobs in nurseries advertised in *Nursery World* this week are paid at £6 to £7.50 an hour. Do you really expect a well qualified graduate with a 2:1 or a first-class degree to consider early-years teaching, when they could become a QTS with real career progression?

Elizabeth Truss: I would point out that graduates in early years are paid more than that. There tend to be different rates of pay for different levels of qualification.

Alex Cunningham: That is what is being advertised.

Elizabeth Truss: What I would say is that this is the debate I wanted to launch when we launched the “More Great Childcare” document about the way we structure our nurseries in this country compared to other countries, the different staffing arrangements they have in countries like France and Germany, and the much higher levels of pay.

Q117 Alex Cunningham: Finally, going back to the Sutton Trust review that we discussed yesterday on the Floor of the House, and the research by Oxford University, which maintains there is insufficient high-quality provision for the two-year-old offer from the numbers that are existing today—and I recognise your 90% figure—can you guarantee that, as we expand this programme rapidly, there will be the high-quality provision for all the young children who are going to be covered by it?

Elizabeth Truss: Absolutely. We want those children to be with good and outstanding providers, and that is why we are putting through legislation this session to enable schools

to take two-year-olds without having to register separately with Ofsted. That is where we are seeing an increase in the number of schools taking two-year-olds, including one in your constituency, which I pointed out on Monday. That is why we are encouraging school nurseries to be more flexible in terms of the hours they are open and the way they serve parents because, at the moment, we are not getting proper value from our school nurseries, which are often only open from 9 to 3.

There is an overall issue about where the costs in the system are going. The fact is we do spend a lot on childcare in this country, both from the Government and from parents. We do not get best value for money. We are not using our school facilities well enough.

Q118 Alex Cunningham: The bottom line, Minister, is that you believe all two-year-olds coming into the system will have high-quality provision. That is basically what you are saying.

Elizabeth Truss: Can I point this out? Let us say our schools were not good enough. Let us say the school provision was not good enough. We would not say, "Oh well, we are just not going to have any six-year-olds going to school because the classes are not good enough." What we do is we improve the classes. Rather than saying those two-year-olds should miss out, what we should be saying is, "How can we make sure, in every single local authority, there is a much higher proportion of good and outstanding provision?" We should not be saying, "Let's hold off on offering this place until that provision is there."

Q119 Ian Mearns: Minister, we have had evidence in this inquiry that there is a diminution and, in certain cases, a loss of local authority support for training and for CPD, and that is being felt across the country. The strand of opinion says that it is not realistic for heads of small providers and small settings to, first of all, identify the needs, research suitable training and pay the costs of suitable training for their own staff, because it is a very tall task, particularly in those small-setting situations. What progress has the National College for Teaching and Leadership made in considering how to encourage early-years engagement in a 0-to-18 self-improving education system? When are we likely to see some action?

Elizabeth Truss: Charlie Taylor, the head of NCTL, has done a lot of work on this issue. That is behind the early-years teacher programme and the expansion of numbers we have seen in the programme. They are also offering bursaries for apprenticeships at Level 3. Our overall approach is to have a school-led system. What we want to see is school nurseries working with PVI providers to share best practice and to improve training. I have given you the example of Bristol where maintained nursery schools are taking a strong role in training staff in other providers. We see it as being a school-led system and that is why we are also having School Direct in the early years, so that high-quality nurseries can be training up their own qualified nursery teachers.

Q120 Ian Mearns: Do you think you could write to us and flesh that out, so that we can be confident that there will be a universal answer to that question? Otherwise we could have a postcode lottery and a patchwork quilt, in terms of response to that.

Elizabeth Truss: Yes.

Chair: Minister, thank you very much for giving evidence to us today. We look forward to hearing from you on the various issues in the near future.

Elizabeth Truss: It is my pleasure. Thank you.

