

Education Committee

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

Wednesday 27 May 2020

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

Questions 286 - 383

Witnesses

[I](#): Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for School Standards; and Andrew McCully, Director General for Early Years and School Groups, Department for Education

Written evidence from witnesses:



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nick Gibb and Andrew McCully.

Q286 **Chair:** I welcome the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, and the other witness, Andrew McCully. For the benefit of those watching on Parliament TV and the tape, could you kindly introduce yourselves and your titles?

Nick Gibb: My name is Nick Gibb, and I am the Minister of State for School Standards at the Department for Education.

Andrew McCully: I am Andrew McCully, the Director General for Early Years and Schools at the Department for Education.

Q287 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. For all the parents, teachers, support staff and the older children watching today, Minister, and with the phased way in which the Government plan to open schools on 1 June, do you believe that the schools are safe and that there is minimal risk to teachers, support staff and children?

Nick Gibb: We are very much led by the science. The science is very clear that there is less risk for younger children, so the severity of disease in children is lower than in adults. We know there is a moderate to high degree of confidence that the susceptibility to clinical disease of younger children is lower than for adults and for older children.

It is all based on the science, and we are opening schools to more children in a very phased and cautious way, combined with a whole raft of measures to ensure the safety of both teachers and pupils. For example, there will be small groups of children, with no more than 15 in a class, and we do not want those groups of 15 to be mixing with other groups of 15. There will also be enhanced cleansing and hygiene measures, with frequent handwashing. Children and their desks will be at least 2 metres apart and not facing each other, which is often the case in primary schools, so there is respiratory hygiene as well. We have issued primary school guidance, and we have just issued guidance for secondary schools and early years, to make sure that schools are doing everything they can, because the safety of teachers and pupils is of paramount concern.

It is important that we begin the phased opening of schools to more children in a cautious way. Of course, all this hinges on the confirmation that the five tests will be met, as set out in the roadmap. That will be confirmed tomorrow by the SAGE advice. If it is not confirmed, schools will not be opening on 1 June. It all hinges on those five tests.

Q288 **Chair:** There were nine SAGE models for the phased opening of schools. Which model did the Government choose?

Nick Gibb: We relied very much on the Task and Finish Group on the Role of Children in Transmission. We looked at all the groups. You are obviously referring to the 7(b) scenario, which refers to a rota of two



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weeks on, two weeks off, or one week on, one week off. Of course, as well as the science, we want to make sure that children have the best approach to education. It is better for children to have full-time education consistently. Another important factor in schools reopening for more children is that their parents can return to work. It is more effective for that objective for children to be at school full time and not to be involved in the rota.

Q289 Chair: When the original announcement was made about schools opening, the guidance said, "The government's ambition is for all primary school children to return to school before the summer for a month if feasible." Is that still going to happen?

Nick Gibb: It said "feasible", so we will wait to see how the transmission rate falls further, and whether it falls further, and the advice of SAGE. We are totally led by the science. Our determination is to do so in a phased, cautious way. Unless the science indicates that it is safe and wise to do so, it will not happen. Our ambition is for all children to return to school as soon as possible. They are better in school. The standard of education is obviously easier to deliver in schools than at home, although schools are doing a wonderful job in providing online and remote education, which I am sure we will come to later.

Q290 Chair: We are going to come to a lot of that later. Should schools be asking staff who have been defined as clinically vulnerable—the category (b) group, not just the category (a) shielded group—to work on school premises?

Nick Gibb: What we said is that if staff or pupils have people at home who are clinically extremely vulnerable, they are not necessarily to return to school, but if they are clinically vulnerable then it is safe, provided of course that the school is doing everything it can to ensure social distancing is happening.

Q291 Chair: To be clear, are you saying that schools should be able to require clinically vulnerable teachers and support staff to come in?

Nick Gibb: Provided the school is able to ensure there is social distancing at the school.

Q292 Chair: Finally, before I bring in my colleagues, I understand there will be tracking, tracing and testing for all teachers and support staff by 1 June. I just want you to confirm that, but will you also be introducing a system of antibody testing and certification for both staff and pupils returning to school, which would perhaps increase confidence quite a bit with parents and staff?

Nick Gibb: There will be an announcement on track and trace shortly. Testing will be available to any staff or pupil who shows symptoms of the virus, including children under the age of five. That was not going to be the case because of the perceived challenges of testing children under five. They will all have tests available. They will all be able to have tests.



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If they test negative, we know it is safe for them to return to school. If they test positive, all the self-isolation and other health measures can be taken.

Q293 David Simmonds: Certainly in my local area, a lot of the schools and nurseries have been open throughout and there have been no reported issues with transmission among the children who have been attending through the key worker and vulnerable family criteria.

I want to ask about insurance. A critical issue for local authorities, as employers of staff in maintained schools and multi-academy trusts, and ultimately head teachers who make the day-to-day decisions, is whether their insurance company will cover them in the event that there is an outbreak as a result of the return. I appreciate that for academies there is a risk-pooling arrangement underwritten by the Department and the Treasury. What discussions have there been with the insurance industry to ensure that they are satisfied with the risk management for the return of schools? Has there been anything by way of information from their modelling that the Department has been able to use in its deliberations about when the appropriate time is to open, for example, to those teachers who may have been shielding, as you were just describing?

Nick Gibb: Let me bring in Andrew McCully, the Director General, who I think can say more about the insurance and the discussions with the insurance industry.

Andrew McCully: We have not had direct discussions with insurers on this. You are right about the risk protection arrangement, which is not just available to academies. It is now also available to local authority schools. Most insurance arrangements are linked back to the risk assessments, and all schools will be doing a risk assessment of the safety to come back. Provided that risk assessment is done—and all schools will be doing that using the guidance that the Department has provided—my assumption is that that will be linked back into insurance. But let me be clear that we have not had the sorts of conversations with the insurance industry that you have just asked about.

Q294 David Simmonds: That is helpful to understand where the Department is at. I know there are two major insurers that tend to underwrite maintained schools and others, and they have a long history. Could you assure us that you will have a conversation with them? I am mindful of the fact that it is possible—and we have had experience of this in other contexts—that those insurers will say, potentially quite late in the day when the risk assessment has been completed, that they are not willing to stand behind those risks. That may create some last minute turbulence in what we would all like to see as a smooth path to reopening. Having the agreement and involvement of those insurers would be useful. We have already seen examples in the private sector of schools saying they would like to reopen but they cannot because their insurer is not willing to stand behind them.



Andrew McCully: I will happily take that suggestion forward.

David Simmonds: Thank you.

Q295 **Jonathan Gullis:** Thank you, Minister, for joining us this morning. You have obviously said that we are not going to open until we know the science is safe, and the Government have given a very strong message about that. Unfortunately, events over the bank holiday weekend involving Mr Dominic Cummings have meant that the Government's message has been undermined. Even though the law may not have been broken, the spirit of the law has indeed been broken. Lots of parents, teachers and academy trusts have been emailing me—and I am sure many other members of this Select Committee—about how they can rebuild and regain confidence in the Government's messaging. What is the Department for Education going to do to assure those parents and teachers that we are doing everything in the correct way to reopen schools in a phased manner?

Nick Gibb: We are, and the reason why we can even have this discussion is because of the success of people's commitment to social distancing. That has meant that the R factor has fallen. We are in a position now to be able to say, while anticipating further progress, that schools will be in a position to reopen to more students and more pupils. The more we all adhere to the rules, the more we will be able to make further progress in reopening schools.

It is important that more children come back to school as soon as possible, and that is how we can help their wellbeing. It is important for them to be able to socialise with their peers, as well as ensuring the most effective way of delivering high standards of education.

Q296 **Christian Wakeford:** What work is being done with councils and teachers to overcome some of the mixed messaging out there? To use my own council area as an example, it has written to all schools saying not to reopen. Obviously the messaging from the council is at loggerheads with that coming from the DfE. What is the DfE doing to overcome that mixed messaging and to assure everybody that schools are safe to reopen?

Nick Gibb: Our regional teams have been talking to local authorities up and down the country. The vast majority of local authorities are preparing and planning for schools to reopen. There are some areas that have particular issues—and I am aware that Durham has a concern over the next couple of weeks—but we are working with those authorities to address the issues and concerns that they have. What I would say to any authority that has worries is to work with us so we can work through the particular issues.

I am very optimistic and confident that the vast majority of local authorities are planning to reopen their reception, year 1 and year 6 on 1 June and are planning for young people in years 10 and 12 to come back part of the time for face-to-face teaching. I am confident that most



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authorities are ensuring the planning will work. There will be a phased approach with that in the week beginning 1 June. There is no doubt about that, but I am confident that the planning is taking place.

Q297 Ian Mearns: Minister, much of the disquiet around the country is because the incidence rate of Covid-19 among the population is very different in different parts of the country. Here in Gateshead, for instance, we currently have, at the last count, 492 cases per 100,000 population, Middlesbrough 475, Sunderland 495 and South Tyneside 491, and yet authorities and schools in this region are being asked to open at exactly the same rate as places like Devon, Cornwall and Dorset, where the incidence rate is about a fifth of what it is in the north-east of England. Do you not think it would be much more responsible to have a differentiated response and take into consideration local conditions, because the R rate is different in different parts of the country and the incidence rate in the population is very different in different parts of the country?

Nick Gibb: SAGE only recognises a national rate. These are averages, they are estimates, and SAGE looks at a whole range of different models when it comes up with the national average. In time, when we have the testing, tracking and tracing approach, we will be able to be more granular in calculating the R factor but, at the moment, SAGE only recognises a national figure.

Q298 Ian Mearns: Given the numbers that I have just thrown at you, do you understand why there is an increased lack of trust in the advice being given from SAGE when there isn't that regional or localised differentiation? We are all being treated the same, but very different conditions are pertaining around the country.

Nick Gibb: Yes, but schools are open all over the country, safely, and vulnerable children and the children of critical workers are attending those schools. The phased, cautious way that we are opening schools to more pupils is being done with safety absolutely as the number one concern, which is why children will be kept in small groups of no more than 15, why they will not be mixing with other groups and why there are all kinds of issues about avoiding pinch points in schools, not having lunch together and how parents collect their children at the school gate. All these issues are being addressed. With extra hygiene and cleaning, and so on, all those issues are designed to ensure that children are safe.

What is important is that children are able to return to school. What we cannot do is have children not returning to school before we find a vaccine, for example, because it could be 12 to 18 months.

Q299 Chair: You will have seen the front page of the newspapers, particularly the *Daily Mail*, which suggest that schools will be quarantined if the virus flares up. It has allegedly been confirmed by officials that there will be temporary closures if needed. Is that the case, and can you explain the thinking behind that?



Nick Gibb: Yes. For example, with the testing now for any children or members of staff who show symptoms, if those tests return a positive result you can then engage in tracing to understand who met whom within the school. It may well be that you ask the group of 15 to return home and self-isolate or, if there has been a lot of mixing within the school, that the whole school will need to be closed and all those pupils be in self-isolation, but that is in extremis.

The other advantage of track and trace is that you can then make decisions on a local basis beyond the school. That is the great advantage of track and trace. It can isolate outbreaks of the virus that occur despite the fact that, nationally, the R rate is reducing.

Q300 **Ian Mearns:** Before any significant communication went out to parents from local authorities in this region that were expressing their concerns, a recent survey of parents at primary schools here in central Gateshead showed that, of a 60% response from parents, 78% of them were reticent to send their children back to school on 1 June because of the local conditions here. Does that surprise you at all?

Nick Gibb: No. There is a lot of anxiety. All of us are anxious about this virus. That is why we have issued very detailed guidance to primary schools about how to manage opening the schools to more pupils. It is why we are inviting back only reception and year 1, because the evidence from SAGE says that the younger the children, the less susceptible the virus is to turning into a disease. Early years is less susceptible than primary, and primary is less susceptible than secondary. That is why it is reception and year 1, because we want to do everything we can to ensure the safety of children as we cautiously and in a phased way return more pupils to our school system.

Q301 **Chair:** You mention reception and year 1, but year 6 is coming back as well.

Nick Gibb: Year 6 because of it being a transition year, yes.

Q302 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Following on from what the Chair has just said about year 6, you have explained clearly the low transmission rates in reception and year 1. What is your rationale for the importance of transition to year 6?

Nick Gibb: Schools have been closed since 23 March, and these young children are about to start a new phase of their education, moving from key stage 2 to key stage 3. Most of them are going on to secondary schools. It is a chance to say goodbye to their friends, which they did not have a chance to do due to the rapid announcement of the closure of schools. I think it is important that they have some time in school to prepare for the more rigorous demands of the next stage of their education.

Q303 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** There are two other groups that transition at this stage, aren't there? There are 600 prep schools where children will be



going from small school environments to a much larger senior school environment at 13, and there are 107 middle schools where children will be going—mostly at 13, some at 12—from a small primary-size school into a large senior setting, again, without having said goodbye to the children. How much more significant is the chance of transmission between a year 6 pupil and a year 8 pupil that you have not felt able to provide the discretion for teachers in those schools to bring back some year 8 students so that they can say goodbye to their friends, too?

Nick Gibb: You and I have discussed this previously, and the Department, officials and Ministers have thought long and hard about this issue, particularly about middle schools as well as the independent sector. The conclusion was that we needed to have consistency right across the country so that all year 6 children, regardless of whether they attend a middle school or the independent sector, would have the further benefit of returning to school from 1 June. That is the decision we took for consistency across the country.

Q304 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Do you think these children will have any opportunity at all to be back in school before the end of term? Lots of the teachers that I spoke to on a Zoom meeting with head teachers in my area were very concerned that they have no answer for those parents whose children do not fall into the reception, year 1, year 6, year 10 and year 12 group. They don't know when those children may be coming back, and some of them cannot see the logistics for how all of those years can come back because of space issues. What information do you have for those parents? Do the year 8 children in these middle schools write things off and move on to the next term and hope that they are able to come to school?

Nick Gibb: We are doing a huge amount with the school system to help provide remote education, and even those year 10s and 12s will continue the majority of their education remotely at home. We only want a quarter of them to come back at any one time in order to maintain social distancing requirements in schools. Remote education, the home education, will continue for the majority of pupils and young people probably to the end of the summer term.

We want young people and young children to come back into school if the science indicates that it is safe to do so. It is a balance and we are balancing the objective of getting more children back into school with the overwhelming objective of ensuring they are as safe as possible and that returning pupils to schools does not result in an increase in the R factor. That is why we are taking such a very cautious approach to opening schools to more children, in order to maintain the R factor, to reduce the R factor, to be led by the science and to make sure that people can be comfortable in sending their children back to school.

Q305 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** If you have children in years 2, 3, 4 or 5 in primary school—of course we want to get the children back, and of course we want it to be safe—what information is being given to head



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teachers and parents about when those children can be expected to be back at school? Parents can see that if you are required to have no more than 15 children in a classroom and children have to be 2 metres apart, there isn't enough space in their schools for all those children to come back.

Nick Gibb: Yes. These are the kinds of factors that we are addressing when working out when and who can return to school. It is why we are inviting back only reception, year 1 and year 6 so there is the space in those primary schools for all the children to return, and for infant schools to use other premises—perhaps the junior school—to enable children to return safely and to maintain the distances between pupils. Safety is our overwhelming priority in this phased return of pupils to school.

Q306 **Chair:** Going back to my previous question, is it unlikely that the Government's ambition for all children in primary school to return to school before the summer is going to happen? It was said it looked like it was pretty much not a fait accompli—I did say under review—but it looked like that was the plan of the Government. Is this unlikely? You need to give some steer to teaching staff and support staff.

Nick Gibb: It is difficult to say. It will be totally led by the science. We won't know for certain until tomorrow whether schools will return on 1 June for reception, year 1 and year 6. That will depend on the science, although schools are planning for it and all the indications are that the science is leading in the right direction, but the confirmation of that will be tomorrow. We won't know until we see more evidence of the R factor continuing to reduce over the next few weeks.

Q307 **Tom Hunt:** I had a conference call with a number of primary school head teachers in my constituency, and a number of them raised questions about year 6. I understand the point about it being a transition year, but many of them felt that those children won't be with them next year, so there is a limited amount that they can actually do with them.

The second point I would like to make is to do with the extent to which you are prepared to trust our head teachers. No two schools are the same in terms of the pupils, the buildings and the physical space. For example, I have some primary schools in my consistency that have very large outdoor spaces where, if the weather is nice over the early part of the summer, they could perhaps do quite a lot in a safe way, but other schools are not the same. It is just the extent to which there is going to be flexibility within the guidance issued by Government and the realisation that head teachers know their schools the best, and they know their pupils the best as well.

Nick Gibb: That is true, but we have to have a consistent national approach to the phased return of schools. We are very clear that that should start with the younger children, so we are talking about nurseries, early years, reception and year 1. We know from the science that the impact on the R factor of those young children returning to school is less than the impact of older children, and the overwhelming objective is



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safety and bringing down that R factor. That is why those decisions have been taken.

We have made exceptions for year 6, for the reasons I have given, and also for year 10 and year 12 because they have missed quite a large proportion of their preparation for GCSEs, A-levels and other technical qualifications at those levels. We want to make sure that we do everything we can not to create a disadvantage for those young people. That is why they are coming back part time to have some face-to-face education.

Q308 Christian Wakeford: With regard to the possible extension to further years, so primary years 2, 3, 4 and 5, I was fortunate enough to have a socially distanced visit to a local primary school to see what the guidance looks like in practice. They are just about able to accommodate reception, 1 and 6 with no room for anyone else. If, all of a sudden, it is a case of wanting years 2, 3, 4 and 5 to come back, there is literally no room in the school to maintain social distancing and for that to be done safely. What plans are in place for those smaller schools that won't be able to accommodate further years if the aspiration is for all years to be back for at least some education before the summer break?

Nick Gibb: Those are the issues that we are addressing: how do you maintain social distancing while also bringing back later groups? We are looking at all the different options—rotas, for example—for that stage, but not now. We are talking about full-time education for the children coming back in the week commencing 1 June. That is one of many possibilities for how we bring back more children while maintaining social distancing, which is why we are so led by the science to make sure that the R factor is low enough to permit more young people to return.

Q309 Jonathan Gullis: To reiterate what Tom mentioned earlier regarding year 6, I am baffled that we are not bringing in year 5 who have SATs exams next year. I think it would be a better move by the Department for Education to bring that year group back before year 6, because they are ultimately the ones who are going to be facing exams. There will be an awful lot of pressure on parents and teachers to try to use term time in the autumn to catch up unless they can go back in June and July of this year.

Nick Gibb: Of course SATs are not qualifications for young people. They are not like GCSEs and A Levels, which really do affect young people for the rest of their lives. SATs are a form of accountability for the school system, so it is very different from the exception we are making for year 10 and year 12. We feel the transition issue is important for year 6, which is why that decision was taken. The points you make carry weight but, ultimately, we were not able to bring back more year groups because of the social distancing and the space in schools. That is why we came to the decision for year 6.



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Meanwhile, of course, young people are continuing their education at home, and I know that primary schools and secondary schools are doing a superb job in providing materials and online materials for young people, as well as all the material that we are providing centrally from the Department.

Q310 Ian Mearns: Minister, can you set out the scientific basis for the guidance that teachers in mainstream settings will not normally require PPE? I am thinking particularly about the circumstances with younger children where teachers and support staff may well have to deal with runny noses and occasionally, sadly, vomiting or incontinence issues. In a recent Zoom call with a school I am closely associated with, the head teacher showed me their bag of PPE, and it was about so big—it was the size of a carrier bag. We know that Covid-19 does not affect children of that age group particularly badly should they get it. What isn't completely clear is the issue of asymptomatic children passing it on to other children. Will those children then pass on Covid-19 to adults either in the school or, more importantly, at home, where social distancing and any PPE is less likely to be in place?

Chair: The key point is what is happening with PPE for teachers who have to look after children with severe behavioural difficulties and who cannot maintain any social distance?

Ian Mearns: I was going to come on to that, Chair, sorry.

Nick Gibb: The scientific advice from Public Health England is that the majority of staff in education, childcare and children's social care will not require PPE beyond what they would normally need for their work, even if they are not always able to maintain that 2-metre distance. PPE is needed in only a small number of cases where the care routinely involves intimate care of children.

Having said that, if a child in a school setting does show symptoms of coronavirus, the routine is that they will be isolated pending their parents coming to pick them up. It might be, as Ian is intimating, that that child needs comforting, is distressed and is very young. That is why schools have, and are entitled to acquire if they don't have it, a small stock of PPE for such circumstances. My understanding is that about 60% of schools have sufficient PPE. There are supply chains. They can use their locally agreed supply chains to obtain PPE and, where that is not possible, they can obtain PPE from the nearest local resilience forum. That is basically the position.

Q311 Ian Mearns: The advice you are reflecting from Public Health England seems to echo the advice that was given to care homes two months ago and that subsequently had to be changed.

Nick Gibb: I can only give you the advice that we have. PPE is a scarce resource. It is available but the priority, of course, has to be care homes and the NHS. The advice is that it is not needed for regular, normal day-to-day activities in schools. There will be a need for some small quantity



of PPE in every school to deal with those contingencies, where a child shows symptoms and is distressed, or where other intimate care becomes necessary in a school. We are led again by Public Health England, the science and making sure that we prioritise the availability of PPE for those that are engaged in more intimate care, the health service and care homes.

Q312 Jonathan Gullis: I know you said that SATs aren't like a GCSE or an A Level, but they have a huge impact on children because they are used by the Fischer Family Trust to determine a student's target grade. Many secondary schools will use that when it comes to putting kids in class sets. I think SATs are important because they are ultimately a huge determiner of the educational path students take within a school.

Nick Gibb: Yes. Of course, this year nobody is taking SATs. We cancelled the SATs tests this year, and secondary schools will rely on other information being sent to them by the school. None of this is ideal. We are working through contingencies to deal with a huge crisis, so we have to prioritise year groups. We have to take decisions and, as I said, SATs are not a qualification that will last a lifetime. Nobody asks you, Jonathan, how you did in your SATs. They are looking at your GCSE results—in my case O-level results—A-level results, degree, other technical qualifications, and so on. Nobody asks young adults how they did in their SATs when they were 10 or 11, but we want young people to continue studying the national curriculum, to practise their reading, to be taught science, music and the arts, to continue studying mathematics and so on. That is why we have so much resource available online to help teachers and parents continue the education at home, which is important.

Q313 Jonathan Gullis: They may not ask about what those SATs results were, but those SATs will determine the target grade of a student. They will therefore determine the performance appraisal of a staff member in a school because of the accountability that we have now created. While it might not be detrimental to a student's lifelong learning achievement, it will have an impact upon teachers and students in secondary school.

Nick Gibb: Except that everybody knows—including the teachers in the secondary school—the problems that those children will have encountered during this crisis, having been at home, so I think there will be a lot more discretion and flexibility in allocating children to different sets and so on. Of course, many secondary schools do their own testing as well to make sure that children are in the right sets.

Q314 Chair: We are going to move to a different topic now. I just want to talk about disadvantaged pupils. We know that, according to Teacher Tapp, 55% of teachers from the most disadvantaged schools think that the average pupil in their class is learning for less than one hour a day. A survey by The Key—the national information service for governors and heads—of 900 heads in England said around 700,000 state school pupils are not being set any work by their schools. Another study, the IFS, says that better-off pupils are spending, on average, 30% more time on



remote learning than disadvantaged pupils.

Your own departmental Deputy Director of Pupil Premium said to the Westminster Education Forum conference on 16 May that lockdown would almost certainly have a very significant impact on the attainment gap. She said the predictions are stark, with up to a 75% widening. That is huge. Do you accept that disadvantaged learners will, on average, have fallen way behind their peers when they return to school, and have the Department or you projected the effect the lockdown will have on the attainment gap?

Nick Gibb: This is something of huge concern to everybody in the Department for Education. This Government came into office in 2010 with its main primary education objective to close the attainment gap between those from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers. That has been our whole objective. We have been relatively successful in delivering that objective. We have closed that attainment gap by 13% for primary and just under 10% for secondary over that period. We do not want to see that success reversed as a consequence of this coronavirus, so everything we are doing is to try to prevent the attainment gap from widening despite all the challenges that are, of course, faced by having children learning at home. That is why we are allocating over £100 million to provide 200,000 laptops and tablets to—

Q315 **Chair:** In answer to my question—we will go on to laptops and online learning later—has the Department projected the effect the lockdown will have on the attainment gap? Prior to Covid, even with the Pupil Premium, which we know is an excellent initiative, there is an 18-month attainment gap by the time pupils take their GCSEs. The lockdown is going to widen that gap. What I am trying to understand is if you have done the modelling to understand how big that attainment gap will be and, in a nutshell, what you are going to do about it.

Nick Gibb: Plenty of people have done those calculations, and you have cited some of them. Our focus is on finding ways to address that challenge. That is where our energies and time are devoted. That is why we have put out case studies. That is why we have provided a huge amount of material online. That is why we have supported the Oak National Academy with 180 video lessons a week.

Q316 **Chair:** All that is great and—

Nick Gibb: It is great, and it is important to addressing this concern.

Chair: It is incredibly important, but we also know that, according to some stats—the Sutton Trust did a survey over a week—two thirds of students were not accessing online learning. I gave you other statistics. What I am trying to understand is that surely the DfE would do modelling on the attainment gap and on what is happening to vulnerable pupils and have a strategy to deal with it. I am not just talking about the very important Elastoplast measures now, which are computers, but what is the modelling? Surely, the DfE's statisticians are doing the modelling for



this and trying to find out what is happening.

Nick Gibb: I can bring Andrew in on that if he wishes to, but my focus as the Schools Minister, rather than poring over statistics, is to work out how we can improve the quality of education for those young people at home, and to make sure that disadvantaged young people taking their exams next year who don't have access to the internet or a computer get that access. It is about making sure that we are helping schools to deliver that education at home. It is why we are bringing back year 10s and year 12s.

The principal reason for that is because they have their exams next year and all young people, whether or not they are from disadvantaged backgrounds, do better when they have some face-to-face contact with their teachers. It is about motivation and about finding the answer to things that young people are struggling with. That is why we are bringing those children back into secondary schools at quarter time. It is why we are continuing to fund schools for their full funding, despite the fact that they are partially closed. It is why we still continue to pay the £2.4 billion Pupil Premium, and it is why we are also providing extra advice to schools about how to spend that Pupil Premium in the most effective way.

The EEF—Education Endowment Foundation—has ample evidence about what it calls promising programmes, which are the most effective way of spending the Pupil Premium to close the attainment gap. All that work is not only continuing but is being amplified and turbocharged to make sure that we are doing everything we can, from a departmental point of view, to prevent that attainment gap from widening.

Q317 **Chair:** I have a lot of sympathy for that, as you will readily understand, but given what is being shown of the effect on vulnerable pupils, I think there should be some kind of analysis going on so that you know how to deal with it in the aftermath. You wanted Andrew McCully to come in very briefly. Is that right or not?

Nick Gibb: Only if he wants to.

Andrew McCully: We are aware of all the analysis that you quoted, Chair, and it all points in the same direction. I am not disputing the level of analysis or the level of concern. That is why, as the Minister was saying, all of our focus is on, for instance, work with the Education Endowment Foundation on the best way in which disadvantaged pupils will be helped, given the scale of the problem that everyone is pointing to.

Q318 **Chair:** You mentioned the Pupil Premium. I am very supportive of that, as I said. Given what is happening to disadvantaged pupils, will you look at and seriously consider the idea of a catch-up premium to help provide extra tuition, wellbeing, mentoring and pastoral care to those left-behind pupils? That will be distinct from what you might want to call a Pupil Premium-plus or whatever—I have called it a catch-up premium—as has



been recommended by the EPI and a number of other organisations.

Nick Gibb: We are working now on how we close that attainment gap over the summer. We are thinking about, when and if schools are able to return in September, how we ensure children catch up on the time they inevitably will have lost, despite all the best work that is happening by schools to provide home education for young people. There is a lot of work happening at the moment, working with other organisations and with education charities, about how we provide summer camp or catch-up education, particularly for disadvantaged children. We will have more to say about that.

Q319 **Chair:** Are you open minded about summer schools? I am not talking about schools opening officially but summer schools. The former Ofsted Chief Inspector, Michael Wilshaw, has said there has to be a lot of catch-up. He has even urged weekends. I am trying to understand whether you are genuinely open to the idea of a catch-up premium and a national volunteer army of retired teachers and graduates, working with existing charities, and perhaps have summer schools for these left-behind pupils to catch up.

Nick Gibb: I am open to all ideas, and we are talking to a whole raft of organisations right now about delivering those kinds of programmes, absolutely.

Q320 **Chair:** On 18 March, the Government announced that schools would close from 20 March. Is it correct that the DfE only started issuing guidance and support for teachers regarding remote learning on 19 April 2020?

Nick Gibb: I cannot remember when we put out the first guidance. Maybe Andrew will be able to remember those dates.

Q321 **Chair:** I am specifically talking about home and remote learning.

Nick Gibb: The Secretary of State was very insistent that we had materials available online as rapidly as possible once schools had closed. A lot of effort was put into getting that material out swiftly. Since then we have updated the lists of online materials. I do not know whether Andrew can remember the date when we first sent out the guidance.

Q322 **Chair:** I want to understand. If that is right, why did the Department take a month to start issuing schools with clear guidance on how to provide remote education during the lockdown?

Nick Gibb: I do not know what the date was, but our focus initially and the first task we had to do was to get materials available online free for use by parents and schools. That was the first and most urgent task we had to deliver, and we delivered it as quickly as possible. I cannot remember the precise date that that went up online.

Andrew McCully: Those dates are accurate, but of course the whole period was full of exchanges with the BBC, schools and trusts throughout



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the country, working with them to understand what their best resources were and ensuring those resources were shared well in advance of the first guidance.

Q323 **Chair:** What if that had been done much earlier, like a few weeks before the lockdown? We knew something big was going to come. If you close the schools and issue guidance over a month later, that is quite tough for schools to get a handle on, surely.

Nick Gibb: Work was happening on preparing the guidance in that period. This guidance is not written in two minutes. A lot of expertise has to be collated in putting that advice together. It has to be advice that is valuable to schools.

As I said, while that advice was being written in a part of the Department, my particular time was spent finding and putting online the materials that schools and parents would need to be able to teach their children. That was a huge and urgent priority both for me and for the Secretary of State. We delivered a raft of online materials very swiftly after schools closed.

Q324 **Chair:** I am trying to understand what you and the Department are doing to see how schools are looking after the children who are not in school, to see the kind of homework being given, whether online or offline, and to assess the amount of work these pupils are doing at home. What is going on? Should you be doing it? Should Ofsted be doing it? Should it just be down to the schools?

Nick Gibb: We trust the professionalism of schools, and my experience of dealing with schools is that they are working extremely well in ensuring they keep in touch with pupils. They are phoning pupils. They are providing work for pupils online or, in very rural areas where there is no online provision for some children, they are delivering physical materials to pupils via perhaps a supermarket as a central collection point and so on. There is a huge amount, and do not underestimate what our teaching profession is doing for schools up and down the country in very difficult—

Q325 **Chair:** I get all that. There is massive amount being done by incredible teaching and support staff. I have seen that in my own constituency of Harlow. Teachers are going in every day to try to make sure children are educated. There are also a lot of children who are not getting that education, and that is a fact according to all the stats, for one reason or another. I am trying to understand whether you are monitoring those children or those schools—and it may be difficult if they have a lot of staff ill, shielding or self-isolating—to see how this online or non-online learning is going on at home.

Nick Gibb: We did not want to have Ofsted inspecting schools during this period. We suspended Ofsted inspections because we do not want another burden added to schools when they are responding to these huge challenges.



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We have 23,000 schools. We trust the professionalism of our school system. It is a school-led system. Of course schools are accountable, ultimately, for the results they deliver for young people. If parents have concerns, they are able to raise them with schools themselves, but we ultimately have to trust the 450,000 professionals in our school system. Your view and my view is that they are doing a wonderful job.

Q326 Chair: I accept that they are, and I am not criticising anyone, but even your own statistics say 84% of vulnerable children are not going to school. We do not know what is going on with those 84%—85%, I think it is. As I understand it, 14% of vulnerable children are going to school.

Nick Gibb: That is true. We had schools open for children of critical workers and for vulnerable children—those children who have a social worker or who are in care, and so on—and the numbers were lower than we had anticipated, but they are being contacted. Our regional teams are working with local authorities to make sure the social care system and the social workers in those local authorities are in contact with the families of those children, making sure they are safe and trying to encourage them to attend school. For some, it will be better for them to be at home, of course. A huge amount of work has—

Q327 Chair: Previously you said that you are not monitoring what is going on with these children who are not learning, and now you are saying they are being monitored. You mentioned that schools are autonomous, and I accept that, but—and I mean this really politely—when it is important that autonomy goes out the window. For example, you have imposed a phonics system on our schools, which I happen to believe in passionately. You have done completely the right thing. You have told schools when to open and close. You have issued guidance on online learning, albeit a month after the schools closed. You cannot say there is autonomy for some things and no autonomy for others.

When there is a pandemic, surely the Government would take a serious look at what is going on for all those children, of whom there are many hundreds of thousands, who—as the statistics show, even though the DfE may not be doing them—are not learning.

Nick Gibb: We are supporting schools and parents to provide education. For example, we are supporting the Oak National Academy. It has 180 new lessons every week, and 8 million lessons have been viewed so far since the Oak National Academy was launched on 20 April after the Easter holidays. We are providing as much centrally as we possibly can. There is a whole raft of other material provided online with links, where the provision is free. We are not prescribing, but we are supporting and providing a whole raft of education materials for young people.

We are in contact with those vulnerable children, by which I mean those children who have a social worker to help them. If they are not attending school, social workers will be contacting the families to keep in touch and to make sure that relationship is continuing. One of the uses of the



computer equipment we are providing, particularly for children with a social worker and those children in care, is to make sure they can keep in touch with their social worker. That is one of the objectives of the £100 million-worth of laptops and—

Chair: We know there are new frontiers of vulnerable children who are also not learning, who may not be in your existing categories and who are exposed to domestic abuse or may be joining county lines gangs. I worry about these children, and I worry that the focus is seemingly not on these children.

Q328 **Tom Hunt:** This touches on some of the points that have been made by the Chair. The Sutton Trust stats, the Teacher Tapp stats and all of those stats indicate that there are not particularly high levels of online engagement. We can say that those stats and surveys are flawed, but at the moment they are the only ones we are working from. Whenever I talk to schools locally, I am incredibly impressed by what they are doing to drive high attendance rates. I know those rates in the independent schools are particularly high.

It concerns me that the schools I am talking to are getting high attendance rates when all these national averages are pretty low, so it seems to me that there are cases where some schools have very low rates of online attendance. Nobody is disputing the fact that teachers are facing unprecedented circumstances. They are working incredibly hard and the vast majority of them are doing a very good job. But these national stats would indicate that there are many schools up and down the country where this action is not being taken.

That does beg the question—particularly when senior figures in some teaching unions appear to have actively discouraged online learning, which is very concerning—whether this should be looked into by the Government and whether various people should be held to account for it.

Nick Gibb: Yes. You make some good points, but my experience is that the overwhelming majority of schools are providing very high quality provision for their young people. We have 23,000 schools, and we have an inspection and accountability regime that exists, but we do not want it to provide more burdens for schools in this period. Ultimately, of course, there will be inspections of schools, SATs and GCSEs that will judge the quality of the education that has been provided in this period. Head teachers of schools are aware of that. That is how our system works, whether we are in a crisis or not in a crisis.

In addition, we are helping schools with guidance on these issues. They have been issued detailed guidance on how to provide education for children at home. We are giving free technical advice. An element of the £100 million—about £14 million—has been spent on free technical advice to schools on how they can get the best out of some of these online platforms. They are not just for emailing; they are for providing high



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quality lessons online for young people. They are getting a lot of support for schools.

My experience, your experience and Robert's experience is that the teachers we come across are doing a superb job of making sure children continue their education while at home. But, ultimately, we need to get children back into school because education will never be as good as it is when children are in a classroom with their teacher. The ultimate objective is to get back to that system.

Q329 Kim Johnson: The Chair has touched on how school closures disproportionately affect disadvantaged pupils in both their wellbeing and the loss of education. This is further exacerbated by the Government's decision not to provide free school meals during the school holidays, with many disadvantaged children going hungry during this holiday period. Austerity has led to nine in 30 children being defined as living in poverty, with a widening attainment gap. With more children now defined as vulnerable as a result of the coronavirus, what analysis does the Department plan to undertake as to how much wider the attainment gap will be as a result of closures? What additional funding will be made available to reduce the gap, and when?

Nick Gibb: The free school meals voucher scheme, although it had a bumpy start with the software and how you apply for the vouchers, has delivered millions of pounds' worth of food. In fact, £101 million-worth of voucher codes have been redeemed in supermarkets since the scheme commenced. That is £15 a week for children eligible for free school meals, which is more than we were paying before. It was available over Easter. We have said—and Vicky Ford, the Minister responsible, has said—that the costs of the national voucher scheme will continue to be met by the Department for Education over half-term. We are absolutely aware, Kim, of the concerns you raise.

There has also been extra money given to local authorities, something like £3.8 billion, and other business support to support this and other financial challenges for local authorities during this period.

Q330 Kim Johnson: But would you say that 10 years of austerity have had a major impact on schools being able to deliver the required support to those most disadvantaged at the moment?

Nick Gibb: We could have a long discussion about school funding. We negotiated a very good settlement with the Treasury, a three-year settlement for schools, which takes us back in real terms to the kind of funding levels we had before we had to deal with the consequences of the banking crash. We also introduced the Pupil Premium of £2.4 billion a year, specifically targeted at children from disadvantaged backgrounds, to make sure schools were able to close that attainment gap. It has closed over the period. Now everybody in this discussion is worried about making sure we do not reverse some of the gains we made over the last 10 years in closing that attainment gap.



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Q331 **Kim Johnson:** Given that more children will be defined as vulnerable as a result of the coronavirus, the attainment gap might be widened as a result of the situation in which families, children and schools now find themselves.

Nick Gibb: Yes, and that is a worry that I, the Secretary of State and everybody on this Committee shares. Without going over some of the stuff we have been talking about, we are doing everything we can to try to prevent that attainment gap from widening.

Ultimately, the best thing for most children—their wellbeing, their mental health, being able to socialise with their friends and the quality of education—is to get them back into schools, but we can only do that in a phased, safe and cautious way that is in line with the science.

Q332 **Kim Johnson:** We have already touched on the fact that a lot of disadvantaged children do not have access to the necessary resources for home learning. The report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies on educational disadvantage during lockdown is concerning. There is evidence to suggest that some of the pupils in most need of educational support have been least likely to access it. What is your analysis of the different approaches schools have taken? What more can the Department do to ensure consistency across the country, particularly after schools have suffered as a result of 10 years of austerity?

Nick Gibb: This is a concern we have had. That is why, without going over stuff again, we have the £100 million programme to get equipment to the young people who do not have it, particularly the disadvantaged children in year 10 who are taking exams in the following year.

We have published case studies of those schools that are demonstrating best practice in helping and motivating children to complete the work at home. Motivating children at home is a challenge, I am sure, for many parents up and down the country. Schools are aware of this. That is why you hear of teachers phoning families once a week to check in with their pupils and to make sure they are not struggling, are motivated and are completing assignments, homework and so on. These challenges are faced by the school system, and we are providing as much evidence, as much guidance and as much support material.

The computer project has been phenomenal. I pay tribute to the officials, frankly, in the Department for Education. It was not me who did this; it was officials working night and day. We have 200,000 computers that have been built from scratch in a global market where there is huge demand for computers at the moment because of the crisis. It is a huge tribute to the work they have done that we are getting these computers delivered to local authorities and to schools this month and in June.

Q333 **Kim Johnson:** Actions speak louder than words. It is my understanding from my particular constituency that the equipment you have spoken about has not been delivered to those most in need. One of my



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colleagues is going to be talking about laptops and equipment later.

The NEU has stated that the five tests for safe opening need to be met before schools are opened more widely, but there are concerns about protection of vulnerable staff and of staff living with vulnerable people. How can teachers best identify and monitor children who are in need of support, either because they are known to be vulnerable or because they may become vulnerable, while still working hard to deliver education remotely?

Nick Gibb: Of course, if a child shows any signs or symptoms of this virus, they will be asked to return home, their parents will come and pick them up, they will be kept away from other children and then they will be tested so we know precisely what has happened.

We are doing everything we can to make sure that both the staff and the pupils are safe. That is why we are having small groups. That is why we are inviting back only a few of the year groups. That is why we are focusing on the younger age group. We are doing more cleaning, more hygiene and more handwashing. All those issues are designed to deal with safety.

We discussed earlier those staff who are clinically extremely vulnerable, or who are in a household where there is somebody who is clinically extremely vulnerable, and whether they should be attending school.

Q334 **Chair:** You said the clinically vulnerable should be in, provided there can be social distancing. That is going to be hard with lots of small children, isn't it?

Nick Gibb: It is quite complicated whether someone is classed as extremely vulnerable or vulnerable, so I will write to you, if I may, to make sure every dot and comma of that advice is accurate. It is written in the briefing I have in front of me, but it would be a bit dull for the Committee if I were to read it out, so I will write to you so that we have chapter and verse on that.

Q335 **Chair:** That would be very helpful. Could you do it as soon as possible? We are getting a lot of questions.

Nick Gibb: We will do it today.

Chair: That is really appreciated.

Q336 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** To come back to something Tom said about the variation in the number of vulnerable children, we are all worried about the vulnerable children who are not currently accessing the provision available to them for various reasons. In a Zoom call with my local primary school head teachers, there were some really excellent examples. In fact, one teacher told me that 88% of the vulnerable children in his school are attending.

What is the Department doing to speak to schools that are getting



relatively good results about what they are doing to encourage the vulnerable children into school so that other schools can learn from that and we can get more vulnerable children a better education?

Nick Gibb: We continue to publish the best practice that schools are engaged in. We have nine regional education and care teams, REACTs, all over the country. They work very closely with local authorities to make sure the local authorities are talking to the families of vulnerable children.

We have to distinguish between vulnerable and disadvantaged. A child who is vulnerable has a social worker and there are risk factors. We want to make sure those children are encouraged to attend school, and social workers in local authorities need to understand the reasons if they are not attending school. At the moment, something like 15% of all vulnerable children are attending school. Something like 75,000 children, as of 21 May, were in school, but of course we want that to be higher. It has been increasing in the last few weeks. The percentage is gradually moving upwards, and I hope that increase will continue.

Q337 **Christian Wakeford:** We touched briefly on the disparity between schools earlier and how some have a fantastic uptake rate of 100% and others are pointed towards Bitesize or the Oak Academy. As we are coming out of lockdown and pupils are going back to school, that is great and should address some of those issues. But for those in years 2, 3, 4 and 5 who are not going back yet, with teaching resource being much more limited because they are teaching in the classroom, what resource is planned to maintain an online teaching platform with a much reduced teaching resource to make sure those children who are already falling behind do not fall behind any further?

Nick Gibb: This issue does concern us. But as the weeks go by, schools are getting more experienced in providing online work and materials for pupils. We are providing increasing amounts of advice and guidance.

The Oak Academy is a very significant development. The quality of the lessons is very high, and it is improving. They are video lessons. They are increasingly going to be providing a programme of sequenced, coherent curriculum plans for those lessons. There is a huge amount going on. Publishers are also providing material that is available to schools.

We are doing everything we can because remote education is likely to be here for a little longer, particularly for certain year groups and not just the ones you mentioned—2, 3, 4 and 5—but also, of course, 7, 8 and 9. Indeed, years 10 and 12 are also continuing to do most of their education at home, even though they are also coming in for some face-to-face teaching.

Q338 **Tom Hunt:** This is a very quick point. One of my constituents is a young man who is very determined to be a doctor. He did not quite get the grades he needed last year. He is retaking his exams and is determined to be successful in the end. He is a private candidate this year. He cannot



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get any local assessment centre to predict his grades, so he is now in a position where he feels he might have to take a second year out if he wants to achieve his dream of getting the grades he needs to get on the pathway to becoming a doctor. I feel there could be many thousands of young people across the country in a similar position. I want to know what the Government's position is on that.

Nick Gibb: We have been working with Ofqual on this issue. We think the calculated grade system is the right approach so that the current year 11 and year 13 pupils can continue their education.

There is an issue where a private candidate or external candidate does not have a relationship with a school, so there is nobody who can effectively sign off what they think that young person would have achieved had they taken the exam. That is how the calculated grade system works, and it is an issue if there is nobody who can make that judgment in all honesty, based on the evidence they have. We have worked tirelessly to try to find a solution, but it may be that, ultimately, a significant number of those young people will need to take it in the autumn. We have an autumn series for those people in the position of your constituent and for those who have had a calculated grade but are unhappy with that grade. They will be able to take it in the autumn.

Q339 **Jonathan Gullis:** There is a huge potential issue with boys being massively underscored compared with girls due to their being better and progressing higher later in the academic year. What is the DfE doing to adjust for that?

Nick Gibb: I have been discussing it with Ofqual, and it has put a lot of thought into this because of the literature on the issue of undeliberate bias by people making assessments of young people. It consulted widely on this and has given it a great deal of thought.

Ultimately, the standardisation model looks at the prior attainment of the cohort of pupils and looks at how the school has performed in previous years, and it couples that with the rank. The way the system works is that a school will calculate the grade it expects that young person—boy or girl—would have achieved had they taken the exam. Then, within each grading, they will put those young people into rank order. That gets fed into the exam boards and a standardisation model is applied to make sure the schools that underestimated are pushed up and those that overestimated are pushed down. That is based on the record of the school and the prior attainment of the pupils at various schools. This is the fairest way of calculating those results.

Q340 **Kim Johnson:** A condition of the recent funding deal for Transport for London was that free travel for under-18s would be suspended. Were you consulted on this, and what impact do you think it will have on getting children back to school in London?

Nick Gibb: I will have to come back to the Committee on whether we were consulted. The issue for transport is making sure that, wherever



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possible, young people are cycling or walking to school and, where transport is provided, making sure it is sufficiently spacious inside so that social distancing can continue. These are the challenges faced, whether in London or up and down the country. We will come back to you on the issue of Transport for London specifically.

Andrew McCully: I confirm we were not consulted, but discussions are under way with Transport for London to see whether there is any action we can take at the moment.

Q341 **David Johnston:** Minister, I share all the concerns about the attainment gap, but for some children lockdown will have been quite traumatic, based on the behaviour of people in their house or simply the isolation. Has the Department given any thought to how to support schools that will be trying to get children to catch up academically but that will probably see the emergence of some new problems alongside that?

Nick Gibb: You raise a very important point, and we are concerned about it. We have put quite a lot of material online about mental health. The Oak National Academy has material on how to help children retain their mental health in these very challenging circumstances. When children start to go back to school, whether it is year 6, year 1, reception and so on, the pastoral element will, first and foremost, be the prime objective of the school, in many ways over and above academic education. We are concerned about that, and we are giving schools guidance about that particular issue because it is hugely important.

Q342 **Christian Wakeford:** On the point about coming back and supporting mental health, having seen what social distancing looks like in a classroom, it is a stark contrast with what a lot of children are used to, especially younger children. What support is being put in by the DfE to support children from a mental health perspective and to make sure this impact is mitigated and they can get back into full learning as quickly as possible?

Nick Gibb: We have, for example, a coronavirus mental health response fund of £5 million, not just for young people but more generally in dealing with this crisis. The Government as a whole take the mental health consequences of this crisis extremely seriously. We are doing so through guidance to schools, and by making it a priority, as I said, for what schools are doing when children start to return. It is a hugely important issue. What was the other part of your question? I am sorry, I missed it.

Q343 **Christian Wakeford:** It was in regard to not only the mental health impact and trauma at home, as touched on by David, but the impact when they first come back to school and how the environment they have become used to is now completely different, especially for the younger years.

Nick Gibb: Pastoral care will be one of the prime issues for schools as children go back. We are keeping those children in small groups of 15.



They will stay together in primary schools throughout the day. We are trying to avoid them mixing with other groups of 15. It is a stable community. They are with that one teacher to minimise social distance. They become almost like an extended family within the school. Part of that is to help deal with the new environment they are not used to being in since schools closed in March.

Q344 Jonathan Gullis: When we had a session with Barnardo's, we were told by the chief executive that a major concern is the number of children who are not classified as vulnerable because they are not on registers but who will have fallen into that category as a response to Covid-19. That is obviously tragic and is going to put a huge strain on schools with safeguarding, and also on children's services. What is the DfE doing to try to assist local councils and schools with that?

Chair: I mentioned earlier that the Safeguarding Alliance also appeared before us and said there were what they described as "new frontiers" of vulnerable children who are not in your category. They suggested there is a safeguarding crisis in the offing in the aftermath of the coronavirus.

Nick Gibb: Yes, and teachers will be very vigilant about this. We take all these issues seriously. Before the crisis started, we had the mental health Green Paper, which proposed to establish mental health support teams up and down the country to provide support and help to schools in tackling and preventing mental health problems from either arising or escalating to more serious mental health problems. That process continues, and we want to get to a quarter of schools being supported by these teams by 2023. That work will continue because, even before the crisis, we knew that mental health was becoming an increasing issue in modern society for a whole raft of reasons to do with the internet, screen time and so on.

We also have a new curriculum on relationship, sex and health education, or RSHE, which has a large element of teaching on how to be resilient, how to stay mentally healthy, such as through exercise, how to handle crises, how to ration time online and so on.

Q345 Chair: We are going to move on in a minute, but the key point is what we are going to do extra. We know about the existing programmes, which are very welcome, given what is potentially in the offing.

Nick Gibb: We are going to make sure we provide as much support for schools in delivering this new curriculum and with the mental health support teams. The guidance we give to schools will focus on ensuring that pastoral care, particularly when children return to school for the first time after being locked down for many weeks, is a priority in those schools.

Q346 Apsana Begum: The Sutton Trust has warned that disadvantaged students may lose out under a system of awarding grades that relies on teacher assessment. A *Tes* survey of around 19,000 school staff found



that just 39% of school staff in England think the system will be fair to all. How confident are you that the system for calculating grades will not adversely affect disadvantaged groups, and BAME groups as well?

Nick Gibb: Ofqual consulted. It was a swift two-week consultation about the system, which I described earlier. I will not go through it again. Most people felt it was probably the best way of delivering fair results to young people. We had a problem, the exams could not take place, and we did not want young people to have to wait a year to take those exams next year. It would have delayed their moving on to the next stage of their education. We had to find a way of having a calculated grade system. That is a big decision to take, and it was taken in conjunction with Ofqual. The system we have in place is right.

We addressed this very issue in the Ofqual consultation, because it was an issue we were worried about. There is some literature that shows there is bias—Jonathan talked about it earlier—whether it is boys versus girls, the different ethnic minorities or children from disadvantaged backgrounds. We wanted to work out whether there were ways we could compensate for that. A great deal of deliberation was undertaken by Ofqual on this. The answer has been that we could actually make it more unfair if some of the proposed solutions were introduced.

Ultimately, the head teacher of the school will sign off that he or she believes that the calculated grades or estimated grades being given to the exam boards are fair and right and that the rank order within those grades is fair and right. That means there is a big burden, a big onus, on teachers to be as fair and accurate as they possibly can be when they are assessing those grades. I believe, given the professionalism of the teaching staff, they will be as fair as they possibly can be within human frailty.

Q347 **Apsana Begum:** You mention solutions that were considered and deliberated on. Can you share with us what kinds of solutions were considered? I appreciate you are saying that the head teachers ultimately sign off and that we will be relying on the professionalism of teachers, which I completely understand, but that does not address the issues around unconscious bias in the education system. I am not clear about how unconscious bias can be mitigated in teacher assessments and what solutions and measures have been considered.

Nick Gibb: You could take national data on these things and apply different rank orders, but it is so difficult to do. Ofqual has to make sure that whatever system is in place does not disadvantage another child if the rank order is changed.

The current system that has been agreed on does look at the results of the school in prior years, so the schools will want to make sure of that. You can look at the proportions of those different groups in those schools in the actual exams in previous years. This is the kind of evidence schools



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can use to make sure they are not having that unconscious bias when they provide an estimate, as opposed to an actual result.

I do not know if Andrew wants to come back on any of the detail in that Ofqual consultation document.

Andrew McCully: The Minister is absolutely right. All those questions were set out in the Ofqual consultation. Ofqual published the results of that, including the level of support for the consultation, at the end of last week on 22 May. As the publication showed, there were difficult choices to be made, but the solutions Ofqual put forward had the majority of support in each case: looking at the prior attainment of the pupils, looking at the previous performance of the school and using that model of standardisation across the individual rank order of the head teachers.

Q348 **Apsana Begum:** What steps is the Department taking to ensure disadvantaged students will not face barriers should they wish to resit to improve their grades in the autumn? The Sutton Trust's report from April 2020 found that, since schools closed in March due to Covid-19, nearly twice the proportion of pupils from middle-class backgrounds have had access to digital learning online compared with 16% of pupils from working-class backgrounds. All of this has an impact on the way in which students are less likely, for example, to be able to put their lives on hold, to delay sitting exams and so forth. It would be good to hear from you on that.

Nick Gibb: The issues have been absolutely clear. If a young person is not happy with a calculated grade, even setting the date is an issue. We do not know precisely where we will be with the science and the R factor, and so on. Also, we want to make sure there is time for those young people to have some engagement before they resit their exams. That is another challenge, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, so we did not want it to be right at the beginning of September and so on, but of course with A-levels you want it to be sooner rather than later because it might delay their start at university. We will be working with the universities to make sure they are being as flexible as possible about the start date for young people who have decided to take the exam.

We have also reached a decision that, of course, it is not going to be a gamble, that if you do not do as well in the exam as you thought you might have done and the calculated grade is better, that will be the grade that you can have on your certificate. All these issues are being addressed. We are trying to find a way through them to make sure we have the fairest approach for all young people, but particularly for those children who are not as well supported as others.

Q349 **Apsana Begum:** I am not sure if you want to answer this question, Andrew, but I have a follow-up that is specifically about the appeals system. What measures, if any, have been put in place to take into account that disadvantaged students may not have the same level of access as others to the tools required to navigate any appeals process?



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Chair: Could you both answer concisely, please, if you are coming in?

Nick Gibb: Appeal is a difficult issue. What we cannot have is 500,000 candidates appealing against the calculated grade. That is not permitted. The only appeal will be that submitted by the school if the process has gone wrong. A pupil can complain that the process has gone wrong. We are allowing appeals on process, but not on the judgment of the teachers in putting grades forward because that way we simply would not have a system in place.

Ofqual is also considering other options. Ofqual is looking at the particular issue of if schools feel their results as a whole are very wrong compared to the demography, if there are demographic issues that indicate a school's results should be different. The main appeal for a young person who is not happy with their grade is the option to take the exam in the autumn.

Chair: I realise this is predominantly Vicky Ford's area, but we want to come on now to free school meals.

Q350 **Ian Mearns:** Given that 96% of school leaders who responded to a survey about the Edenred scheme said they had problems with the voucher scheme, 86% said parents had struggled to access the vouchers, 83% were concerned about the welfare of pupils yet to receive vouchers and 58% said they had to make alternative provision on occasion if not all of the time, what was it about their proposal that made the DfE select Edenred to do this?

Secondly, Minister, I understand from the figure you gave earlier—£101 million in redeemed vouchers—that it would be just under 7 million redeemed vouchers. However, there is huge disappointment across the field that the voucher scheme was not continued into the Whitsun break. Would you comment on that as well, please?

Nick Gibb: Yes. I will let Andrew come in, when I have finished, on why Edenred was chosen. I suspect it was on the framework, but I am not sure. Everything has to be done at pace, and that has been our issue with computers and everything else; it is pace that matters and who can deliver quickly. I know that Vicky Ford, the Minister, has been personally extremely active and busy in dealing with the problems that arose initially with the functioning of Edenred. She made a personal commitment to sort it out. From her letter to the Committee, you will see that queuing times have been virtually eradicated on the ordering and the e-code redemption sites. Queues now typically last less than five minutes, and very often there is no queue at all.

Vicky Ford has been working with Edenred, which has brought in extra technical support to expand the capability of the website, and so on, to try to tackle those early issues. She is keeping a close watch on it. I think she has done a great job with officials and with the company to iron out those initial problems. Delivering these vouchers is a huge task, of



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course, and they have to be negotiated with the supermarkets and they have to work in the supermarkets, and so on.

Regarding the Whitsun half-term, what Vicky said in her letter is that the cost of the national voucher scheme will continue to be met by the Department over the half-term break.

Q351 **Ian Mearns:** Would you accept that, as well as the scheme has worked—and it has been a real struggle—it has taken a huge amount of time and no little effort, day and night, by school staff to get the system to work? I think school staff deserve praise for the effort they have put in on behalf of the children and their parents to try to make the system work.

Nick Gibb: I totally agree. I spoke to the head teacher of a primary school in my constituency a few weeks ago, and she told me about the wasted hours she spent sitting at a computer trying to get these things ordered. I totally agree with you, but these are the kinds of things that happen when you are trying to roll out a new and massive commercial operation from scratch. It is unfortunate that it happened but Vicky, the Minister, and the departmental officials have been working round the clock to sort out those problems. I think we have them broadly sorted out by now.

I pay tribute to schools generally, because many of them are doing things beyond the voucher, and did things before the voucher came into place, such as sending packed lunches and other food. I know of teachers who have taken packages to homes in their area, and I think it is remarkable.

Chair: Thank you. Can we all try to be as concise as possible in the final 30 minutes or so, please, because of broadcasting issues?

Nick Gibb: Sorry, Chair.

Chair: It applies to us all.

Q352 **Ian Mearns:** Regarding the voucher scheme, is it the case that schools, or teachers themselves, have to pay to call the Edenred number? If it is the case, can that be sorted out? Also, do you intend to continue with Edenred as the supplier if the voucher scheme needs to carry on into the future.

Nick Gibb: I believe there is a freephone number, but some people may have gone on to the Edenred website and used a different number. There certainly is a freephone number, I believe. If I am wrong, Andrew will correct me.

Q353 **Chair:** I have had this in my own Harlow constituency. A lot of people are using the paid number. If that is the case, there is clearly some confusion. Is it possible to make it clear—I don't know how you would do it, perhaps by putting it on your website—that the number is free for teachers and families to call?



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Andrew McCully: We have done that. All our communications emphasise the free number. I know of a number of those concerns, and our only assumption is that parents have googled Edenred, looked at another service and ended up paying for a phone call by accident.

Q354 **Chair:** Is it Edenred's number or the number of some other organisation? Can you just tell them to take it off their website while this is going on?

Andrew McCully: Edenred runs a number of other services, and we think that is what must have happened. All the communications about the Government scheme, all the direct communications to schools, quote the free number.

Q355 **Chair:** All right, but can you tell Edenred to put the free number on its website, please?

Andrew McCully: I think it already has done, but we will talk again, certainly.

Q356 **David Simmonds:** I want to move on to a discussion about technology, which I know we touched on earlier, to support youngsters who may be disadvantaged. Minister, can you tell us about how the decisions are made on the funding and distribution of the digital access support scheme? Is it your view, particularly given that there are a number of schemes run by local authorities, that this scheme should ensure every eligible child is receiving a device, or is it dovetailing with existing schemes?

A follow-up question at the same time: how do you propose to evaluate the impact or benefit of the scheme and whether the evaluation of local authority-run schemes that have already taken place has fed into the decisions the Department has made?

Nick Gibb: First, this scheme is in addition to all those other existing schemes. The way we calculated the figure is by working out who would be eligible and, from that, working out the budget for the purchase of the items. We will monitor the implementation, and we will measure success through a combination of qualitative research and data collected by local authorities and multi-academy trusts—the two bodies responsible for delivering the computers to the relevant homes.

This is a phenomenal project: 200,000 computers, laptops and tablets built from scratch in a globally challenging marketplace in which there is huge demand for these devices. Again, I pay tribute to the officials in the Department and the computer centre who have delivered the devices.

Q357 **David Simmonds:** The other part of my question is about evaluation, and the follow-up is about how we will learn from it. I am conscious that, for many years, local authorities have supplied looked-after children with IT kit to enable them to participate in education and to level the playing field a bit. I am interested in whether the Department has in mind a similar evaluation to see what lessons can be learned from this project.



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Nick Gibb: Yes, we will be evaluating the project. We will use data collected by local authorities and by multi-academy trusts, and some qualitative research will be conducted to evaluate the success of this particular programme. It is an expensive programme, so it will need to be evaluated.

Q358 **Chair:** Around 1.5 million pupils are eligible for the Pupil Premium but are not covered by the laptop scheme, and 17% of households in the lowest income quintile do not have access to the internet. The Children's Commissioner suggested that 700,000 children have neither a laptop nor a desktop computer at home. What are the plans for those individuals who are not part of the existing scheme?

Nick Gibb: We had to prioritise where the resources would go, where the 200,000 devices would be delivered, and we prioritised children in care, those children who are known to a social worker and those who are in year 10 and are taking exams next year. That was clearly the priority. Schools have other computers that they are lending and using to make sure they can deliver online lessons to their pupils. Those computers exist already.

Q359 **Chair:** Given that we know, and we have touched on this before, that so many kids are sadly not doing the online learning—and I do welcome the brilliant initiatives, whether through the Oak National Academy, Google or BBC Online—have you had talks with broadcasting services? We know that 95% of households have a telly. Have you had talks with broadcasting services about whether they could broadcast educational learning, at least for a few hours a day, perhaps on BBC Two or BBC Four—trusted broadcasters? People could access their year group by pressing the red button on their remote control so that those kids who do not have access to online learning could perhaps at least sit with their families or carers and get some learning from the television.

Nick Gibb: Yes, that is precisely what we have done. We have had discussions with the BBC. BBC Bitesize is providing high quality lessons that can be viewed through the television.

Q360 **Chair:** It is very few, though. I am talking about a good few hours every day for each year group on one of the major television channels. Via the remote control, you would be able to access some serious broadcasting for two or three hours a day—a national education broadcasting service, if you like.

Nick Gibb: My understanding is that the BBC has increased its quantum—I will let Andrew come in if he wants to say anything more—so it is not just what was there before the crisis. The BBC has been producing more content. If I am wrong, Andrew will correct me.

Andrew McCully: The provision is quite extensive. The BBC has been building it up from their initial launch, and their commitment is continuing.



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Q361 **Chair:** How many hours a day?

Andrew McCully: I don't have that figure.

Q362 **Chair:** It is not that much. It is great, and we thank the BBC, but I am talking about a serious national effort, a national education broadcasting service. Perhaps putting the Oak Academy on TV, for example.

Nick Gibb: These are interesting suggestions. Oak is providing four hours of lessons a day for secondary and three hours a day for primary, and 8 million lessons have been viewed so far. It is a very successful programme for schools and for parents. I like the idea of it being broadcast. I am sure there are all kinds of IP issues and so on, but we will certainly have a think about that.

Q363 **Chair:** With your muscle, I am sure you could make it happen.

Nick Gibb: Metaphorical muscle, yes, absolutely.

Q364 **Jonathan Gullis:** One of the ways in which you could potentially catch up—and this is something I have mentioned on the Select Committee before—is the idea of summer school education with an army of volunteers. I appreciate that teachers have been working tremendously hard, and I am certainly not suggesting that they have not, but is there any opportunity to look at schools being open over the summer holidays to assist students in those key year groups, especially years 10 and 12 and early years, to catch up, which could be done with volunteers if not with teachers themselves? Has there been any discussion with unions about the potential for using the summer holidays, where pay and conditions would obviously need to be discussed?

Nick Gibb: Can I thank you, Jonathan, for volunteering in your previous profession and going back into schools and teaching? It is much appreciated by all.

The answer to your question is yes. We are talking to the sector, to education charities, to those engaged in teacher training and so on, with a view to coming forward with a package to catch up over the summer. I am being a bit coy with details because we are still having those discussions. We will be able to say something fairly soon about the outcome of those discussions but, yes, we need to be able to use volunteers, teachers who are about to start, trainee teachers and so on, to make sure that everybody can handle—

Chair: There are a lot of very good charities out there. We are having some of them in to discuss this, and I have met them separately over the last few weeks. They are already doing this, providing extra tuition and mentoring. Some of them have very good results and some of them have the data, which is something I know you are always interested in, the outcome. This could potentially be a very exciting project, a national army of education volunteers, which Jonathan and I, and others, have talked about.



Q365 Tom Hunt: Clearly the last few months have been a pivotal period for many children. If their school and their teachers get it right, that can be mitigated and the impact on the children's education can be not too adverse. But any occasions where we get it wrong—as has been quoted by a number of sources—can have a devastating impact on many children's education.

We had a session with the Chief Inspector of Ofsted not too long ago. My understanding is that she said that Ofsted would not be taking into account in future assessments anything that has gone on in the last few months. I understand the point you made earlier, that at this time we do not want to be putting additional burdens on schools. I also take your earlier point that the vast majority of teachers in our country are doing an absolutely fantastic job, and every school I have spoken to in my constituency is doing that. Clearly, however, as we spoke about earlier, those national surveys indicate there are occasions, it would appear, where there are perhaps some teachers, perhaps some schools, that have not come to the fore. Surely finding a way at some point in the future where Ofsted can, to an extent, capture to what extent schools and teachers have come to the fore is important.

Connected to that, what role should Ofsted have in ensuring schools have comprehensive catch-up programmes for pupils impacted by school closures? Finally, how should Ofsted monitor school catch-up programmes?

Nick Gibb: Again, and referring to your preamble, we have to be very careful about Ofsted inspections putting a burden on schools during this period when they are working round the clock to deliver education, increasingly in the classroom and also remote education for children at home. We have to be very careful.

Having said that, at some point inspections will resume. Of course, schools vary and one of the objectives of this Government has been to try to eliminate that variability, to make sure that those schools that have been underperforming continue to improve. We can provide all kinds of support to schools to improve if they are not providing the quality of education that they ought to be providing. That school improvement process continues and the process itself continues to improve, we finesse it, so that goes on. If I were trying to sell the Government, I would say that over the last 10 years we have reduced the number of schools that are underperforming, but that project is not finished.

Q366 Ian Mearns: Can I ask the Minister an uncharacteristically controversial question? He said earlier that nobody asks or is interested in how children did in their key stage 2 SATs. I am thinking particularly of the children who do not pass, is this not a great argument for abolishing the 11-plus for entry into the remaining grammar schools?

Nick Gibb: No. We have 163 grammar schools. They are very—something like 98%—



Q367 **Ian Mearns:** But nobody is interested, Minister. Nobody is interested.

Nick Gibb: Well, the parents of the children who go to them are. Of course they are interested in those selection tests, but they are not SATs; they are a different set of tests.

Ian Mearns: I am aware of that.

Nick Gibb: They are set by local authorities, whether it is Medway, Kent, Buckinghamshire or wherever. There are some issues about that test, which we are grappling with at the moment. Those 163 grammar schools are very high-performing schools: 98% are good or outstanding; 86% are outstanding—

Q368 **Ian Mearns:** But Minister, on behalf of the children who do not pass the 11-plus, using the same logic as in the answer you gave about key stage 2 SATs, isn't the logic exactly the same?

Nick Gibb: Well, there are issues about the tests. The tests are normally sat in, I think, September and they need the results before the closure of applications for secondary schools, which is mid-October. There are some issues that the selective education sector is grappling with in discussion with the DfE, and we are looking at those issues. One of them is, as you intimate, about children who have been out of school for several weeks and the disproportionate effect that might have on some children versus others and, therefore, the effect on fairness. We are grappling with those issues at the moment and talking to the sector about them.

Q369 **Chair:** I think the Committee will probably be debating grammar schools at another time. Jonathan Gullis has a particularly strong view on the other side of this argument.

Can I quote to you a father who wrote to me suggesting that his son, who normally attends a special therapeutic school for children with attachment issues, may face exclusion because the child is not able to maintain social distance and there is spitting? The father says, "It cannot be right that SEN children unable to adhere to social distancing guidelines face exclusion from school, temporary or permanent." This is obviously a very difficult case, but can I ask what the policy is towards exclusions during the coronavirus? Is it correct that school policies must ensure that no child is excluded as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak?

Nick Gibb: I won't comment on that specific case, but I will happily take it up via correspondence.

Regarding exclusions generally, in my experience—and according to the feedback we have been getting from our regional teams, who are talking to schools and local authorities—there is a reluctance among head teachers to exclude during this crisis because the children who are attending school at the moment do tend to be either the children of critical workers or are vulnerable children. Those are two categories of children who we do not want to be excluded if at all possible, except in very extreme circumstances. I think that is what is happening at the



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moment. We have had to make quite a few changes to regulations in the appeal system for excluded children, to make sure that can still occur remotely and those kinds of issues.

Q370 **Chair:** Are you saying, in a nutshell, that ideally they should not be excluded at this time?

Nick Gibb: We cannot make that kind of blanket pronouncement. The guidance says this is a matter for head teachers, ultimately, but my experience is that head teachers are reluctant to exclude during this period, for all the reasons I have just given.

Q371 **Chair:** If the child is excluded, the appeal system during this time should be as robust and strong as ever. Do you agree?

Nick Gibb: Yes, except it will be remote. We have changed the regulations to allow those appeal meetings to be remote. I think there has been a period during which our guidance has said they can take place remotely but the regulations had not caught up. We have now set that up.

Q372 **Chair:** A secondary teacher who wants kids to go back to school also contacted me. That is her view. She says that the DfE has been anything but clear in guidance. She says, "There have been 46 updates to the guidance, advice has been frequently contradictory, sometimes within the same document, which has often contained errors, resulting in the document being pulled down and re-uploaded and the timing of updates released at times that give schools little opportunity to respond. For example, the recent EY guidance was updated on Sunday 24 May, during the bank holiday, and yet schools were expected to be ready for pupils to return on the Monday. Such poor organisation, moving goalposts, has caused many head teachers to be continuously updating plans or changing them." Do you accept that? Why have there been so many updates, and why are there errors in them, with the documents being pulled down? Surely these things should be checked properly, and teachers and support staff should be given a lot of notice on what they need to do.

Nick Gibb: Most of the updates that I am aware of are due to things moving on, with new science and new policy. This is a fast-moving crisis and things do change from week to week, and that is really the main reason for those updates. I know there was some unhappiness with the publication on early years happening on a Sunday over a bank holiday weekend. Our officials do work over the bank holidays at the moment. They are working around the clock to get this advice and guidance out as soon as possible. That early years guidance was ready for opening schools on 1 June.

Q373 **Chair:** On the documents with errors being pulled down and re-uploaded, and so on, obviously human error is human error but is there a checking system so these things do not happen, to make it a bit easier for teachers to understand what is going on?



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Nick Gibb: Maybe Andrew—I don't know. I am not aware.

Andrew McCully: There is a very strict protocol, which involves checking at every level. On one or two occasions that protocol has found errors at the last minute, which has given rise to one or two of the problems you have identified, but there is a very extensive protocol to make sure that when things are published, they are right. Sometimes that takes long to clear, which adds to some of the time problems you have just talked about. In a very fast-moving situation, we want to get the guidance out as soon as it is accurate, ready and has been cleared with the scientists and the health officials.

Q374 **Chair:** Forty-six updates is quite a lot to get their heads around.

Andrew McCully: Virtually all of those updates are because of new things coming in. The guidance remains valid, but new things are added to the guidance as new developments come through.

Q375 **Chair:** Can I ask you to clarify the Government's policy if local authorities decide that they do not want their schools to open next week?

Nick Gibb: We are talking to those local authorities. Generally speaking, the vast majority of local authorities are planning to open in the week commencing 1 June.

Q376 **Chair:** I've got that, but some are not. They have made it very clear that they are not going to do it. What are you going to do? What is your policy?

Nick Gibb: Our policy is that we continue to talk to them. Our regional teams are talking to them, and our regional schools commissioners are talking to those local authorities. I am aware of Durham, for example, which says they are not going to open until 15 June. We continue to talk to them. My general impression is that local authorities are ready to open in the week commencing 1 June, or very soon thereafter. We understand there are local issues confronting some local authorities, and we will help those authorities to work through those issues.

Q377 **Chair:** Can I ask you to confirm something again? At the very beginning you said there was a track, trace and testing announcement today. Can you say again, please, what antibody tests will be available to teaching staff and support staff?

Nick Gibb: I was not talking about antibody tests. I was talking about testing those staff and children, including the under-fives, who show symptoms. They can be tested and get the results back within 48 hours. Then they know whether it is safe for them to return to school or whether they need to self-isolate. If they are positive, they need to work out what contact they have had with other pupils in the school.

Q378 **Chair:** Will there also be a programme of antibody tests available for teachers and support staff?



Nick Gibb: I don't know whether Andrew is more up to date with the conversations with the Department of Health on antibody tests.

Andrew McCully: The work on antibody tests, the science behind them and the degree of accuracy and validity, is still not there. A lot of work has been done, not just in this country but in other countries too, to improve that. We cannot introduce those sorts of tests until we are clear about the accuracy and the effectiveness.

Q379 **Kim Johnson:** I want to go back to the beginning of the session and talk about the decision for schools to go back on 1 June. You keep referring to how decisions have been led by science, but I am a little confused, given the information we have received from SAGE on the nine scenarios they have identified, that the model used to return on 1 June was not included. Who decided, and how, on 1 June and going back in the way proposed with those year groups?

Nick Gibb: The science looks at the rate of infection. I have the minutes in front of me. There is a table that looks at the effect on the R factor of different age groups, and it ranks them from least to most. It is that information that has led to our decision. It makes it very clear that the early years are less likely to increase the R factor than primary, and primary is less likely than secondary. The younger the children, the less impact they have on the R factor. That is all in table 3, table 2 and table 1. I think it is called paper 300 of the SAGE minutes. It is that evidence that led us to take a view—and it was not the view of a lot of people in the sector who thought the secondary schools should come first—that it was the early years, nursery, reception and year 1 that were the safest groups to bring back in a phased, cautious way.

On top of that, we had other issues to address, such as full time and not a rota system, because we think the children need that full-time education, not one week on and one week off. The impact that a rota system would have on parents' ability to go back to work is also a factor that needed to be considered. Then we took into account the transition year and the issues facing the year 10s and the year 12s with their exams next year.

Q380 **Kim Johnson:** Sorry, Minister, you still have not answered my question. The proposal for returning to school on 1 June was not included among the nine scenarios.

Andrew McCully: There were policy considerations that came in on top of the science and the transmission rates. As the Minister has just said, there are policy considerations, such as recognising the importance of transition, that scientists do not address, as well as the policy issues of recognising the operational constraints within schools—Mr Wakeford was talking about the space within schools earlier—these are the sorts of policy considerations that come in on top of the science questions. That is why the science guides and the policy considerations are made on top of it.



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Q381 Dr Caroline Johnson: There is an antibody test that the DHSC has approved and is being rolled out to medical and nursing staff on the frontline so that they can be tested and know if they have already had the disease, which will help with keeping more people at work on the frontline and provide some of them with reassurance. Will you be pushing, as capacity allows, for teaching and support staff in schools also to receive this test?

Nick Gibb: It is an issue of capacity, as you say. If it is available to the education sector, we would be very pleased to adopt it. Anything that gives evidence that it is safe for individuals to return to work is hugely helpful, particularly if we know that having the antibody also provides immunity to a degree.

Q382 Dr Caroline Johnson: I have not seen the chart you described, with the R rates for different age groups in schools. Is that in the public domain?

Nick Gibb: Yes, it is. It was published. Was it last week, Andrew?

Andrew McCully: Yes. SAGE publishes all its material in a sequence, and it published a great deal of material last Friday. This and a number of papers relevant to the education question were all published together on Friday. Very important and considerable evidence was put out in the public domain last Friday.

Q383 Chair: Finally, where pupils are going to do the GCSE and A-level exams in the autumn and they have left the school, will the school help them prepare for the exams, given that they have been out of school for a few months? What is the timing of the schools in these cases?

Nick Gibb: That is a very good question because, of course, the pupils have left the school, so it is a question of whether the schools can provide any assistance. There is also the issue of whether the school has the capacity to hold the exams, given all the other things that are going on in the schools. These are issues that we are addressing at the moment.

For many young people taking their GCSEs, it will be about revision, I am afraid, at home, and it will depend on the relationship they have with their school, particularly if they have left. Some pupils will not have left; some will be going on to the sixth form in the school and will still have a relationship with the school. These are issues that we are addressing because we want to make sure the system is as fair as possible for all young people.

Chair: I end by thanking you, Minister and Andrew, for sustaining this continuous barrage of roving questions on every conceivable subject. It is really appreciated. We want to give special thanks to all the DfE staff who are working during the coronavirus to try to make things right, and of course, most importantly, to the teachers and all the support staff and education professionals as well. Thank you very much indeed. We wish you well and all good health.