



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Appointment of the Ofqual Chief Regulator](#),
HC 822

Wednesday 16 March 2016

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Members present: Neil Carmichael (Chair), Lucy Allan, Michelle Donelan, Lucy Frazer, Catherine McKinnell, Ian Mearns, Stephen Timms, William Wragg.

Questions 1 – 44

Witness: **Sally Collier**, Government's preferred candidate for the Chief Regulator of Ofqual, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Welcome, Sally Collier, to this part of the process for appointment of a new Ofqual Chief Regulator. We are the Education Select Committee and do have responsibility for checking what Ofqual is up to, and this is part of the process that we are involved in throughout the whole period of any successful candidate to be Chief Regulator. We are going to ask you a series of questions and then deliberate and make our conclusion, which will become public in due course.

Sally Collier: Thank you.

Chair: Welcome to our Committee. I am going to start off with the simple question of: what attracted you to the role?

Sally Collier: It is a fantastic, challenging role. I was at the stage in my career where I was beginning to look at what else I might do. There were probably three criteria. One is I wanted another CEO role. I have been a CEO for two years in the current role, and a managing director before that, so I was looking for another CEO role. I was looking for a public sector or a related public sector organisation, and I was looking for something challenging and extremely interesting. I think this job met all of those criteria. A number of things pass my desk every day, and when this one passed I said, "Stop. That is hugely interesting".

Q2 Chair: Thank you. What do you think you can bring to the role of Chief Regulator?

Sally Collier: A number of things, I hope. First and foremost, I am an experienced leader in the civil service. I have managed organisations, from nothing to quite large organisations, through periods of significant reform, so I think I bring a set of leadership skills. I think my current world of public procurement at first glance may not look as if it has many similarities, but there are some. First, it is hugely complex. It is regulated. It has an enormous number of stakeholders who often do not agree with one another. It has not been without its public headlines for spending taxpayers' money wisely. I think there are a number of similarities where I have developed skills to work in that environment that I could transfer to this sector.

Q3 Stephen Timms: You have had a career over 20 years, I think, in Government procurement. How has that experience prepared you for this particular role?

Sally Collier: I think I would go back to my previous answer. That environment is a regulated one. Again, the tip of the iceberg of public procurement is how we are spending taxpayers' money and why are we not giving contracts to X, Y and Z, whereas underneath the surface there is a whole environment, and ecosystem, and different stakeholders. I am very used to working in that environment, a complex one. I also think it is a pretty challenging and hardnosed environment. The commercial world is not an easy one. It requires me to make constant judgments based on facts and evidence, often in the face where not all stakeholders will agree with you always, and I am absolutely confident that is the case in the job of a regulator. Those are perhaps additional things I would bring to the role.

Q4 Stephen Timms: You do not have a background in assessment or, indeed, in education. If you were doing the role, how would you get on top of the quite technical judgments that Ofqual has to make?

Sally Collier: First, I would say I relish the thought of doing that. I relish the thought of getting underneath this complex and really interesting system. Certainly, the reading I have done so far has told me it is much more complex than at first it would seem. I really would enjoy doing that, and I need to do it as quickly as possible. I know the team have an intense induction lined up for me, and what you would do in the early phases. I will take some time to get up to speed, I recognise that, and you have to rely on the experts around you. We have Amanda, who I think is sitting behind me, who is very experienced in this sector and will help me and the team get up to speed very quickly.

Q5 Stephen Timms: We gather a number of senior staff have left Ofqual recently, particularly staff with high level assessment expertise. How would you make sure you had enough expertise in the organisation to support you on those technical decisions you have to make?

Sally Collier: With any organisation the leader of it is only as good as the people you have behind you. I am not aware of individual cases, but I would look where there are any gaps and I would go and convince other people that this will be a fantastic place to be. I would look to understand where there are gaps and where we can draw on expertise from around the ecosystem.

Q6 Stephen Timms: Are there regulators or inspectors that you have come across, or know of, who you would see as role models for you in taking on this job?

Sally Collier: None in particular, but I had been thinking and welcome ideas for who they might be. I have already had a conversation with the ex-chairman of Ofwat, and are there certainly other organisations—if not regulators—that I would look to learn from.

Q7 William Wragg: Do you think that Ofqual's status as a non-ministerial department is a sufficient guarantee for its independence from the Government?

Sally Collier: That is a really good question. I am not sure I can answer that currently. I think it has the same status as other regulators. It does not report to the Government, it reports to Parliament. It is very well established; it has established itself as being an organisation that can speak out on matters where it needs to speak out, as any regulator does. I am not aware that there are any particular problems, but it is something I would clearly look at.

Q8 William Wragg: We will take your personal role then as a regulator. As Chief Regulator, what would you do to protect the independence of the qualifications system? You clearly have extensive experience in the civil service. I am almost tempted—perhaps a bit glibly—to say that it is moving from, “Yes, Minister” to a “No, Minister”. How could you protect the independence of your office?

Sally Collier: That independence is one of the attractions of taking the job. There is a whole system around the organisation, its statutory objectives and its duty to consult. All of the system around it is to make it independent. It is reporting to you. I am relishing the chance to make that move into independence. By the way, I do have a track record of not always saying, “Yes, Minister,” and I am sure you will find that out.

Q9 Chair: Following on that theme, of course you are the regulator of the system, so to speak, but there are challenges to the system and ideas of changing the system. How will you respond to that debate?

Sally Collier: You mean there are differences—

Chair: Meaning whether we should have multiple exam boards and so on.

Sally Collier: Exam boards?

Chair: Yes.

Sally Collier: Of course. First, I would want to understand each of the stakeholders and where they are coming from. I would listen; I would seek to understand all the stakeholders. I am very much looking forward to meeting and listening to schools, and head teachers, and exam boards. There are big constituents of stakeholders that I want to understand. I want to understand the opinion. I would want to understand the evidence and the research that Ofqual has brought to bear, always through consultation. Then you take a judgment on each case. That is the way you behave as the leader of the organisation.

Q10 Lucy Allan: Moving back to something William was saying, the perception of Ofqual by teachers and head teachers is that it is too close to the Government and it also has quite a negative reputation in terms of trust. I wonder how you would seek to tackle that in terms of teachers' trust and confidence in Ofqual.

Sally Collier: I think it is a key role, and I am sure it will be one of my key priorities. I will not restore trust, because I think Ofqual is a trusted organisation. It has made its stamp on the landscape in the last few years. You will not please all the people all of the time and you are not going to be universally liked as a regulator. If you are, you are probably doing something wrong. But you can reach out and seek to understand. My not having a background in the sector I think puts me in a really good place to do that, because I can, slate clean, "Let's hear". I will certainly be reaching out to all of those stakeholders, and one of my key priorities will be to have that trust in the regulator.

Q11 Lucy Allan: I think you said it was not as bad as all that, but I am looking at some stats from the Ofqual annual perception survey where it said that 64% of head teachers said that Ofqual was too close to the Government. I want to hear something a bit more specific as to how you might change that perception.

Sally Collier: What I cannot talk about is decisions that have already been made, which it will be my job to implement and make sure that standards are maintained. All I can say is that, as issues come up, I will seek to listen and consult. I think one of the big things is early warning. Nobody wants any surprises in this system. Head teachers do not want any surprises and the exam boards do not want surprises. It is about early and systematic dialogue and consultation so that, when decisions are made, they may not like those decisions but there is respect for that decision and we can all get on with implementing it and move on to the next one. I do not underestimate the difficulty that that will happen in every case, but I and the team will try our utmost to pursue individual issues as they come up on that basis.

Q12 Lucy Allan: Do you think there is something to be learnt from the way the previous Chief Regulator operated? Obviously, if we are at this low level of confidence in Ofqual, was there something that you can learn from how that came about?

Sally Collier: I would not comment on what my predecessor did, but this is the way I do things. You can never over-communicate, and I will learn from the team, clearly, on what has gone before.

Q13 Lucy Frazer: You said early warning of changes is vital and that people do not like being surprised, which is self-evidently true. But you may not always be able to control the agenda because, for example, the Department for Education might make a decision that has an impact that you do not control the timetable for. How would you deal with that?

Sally Collier: Yes, that is very true. It comes back to your question on the perception survey. I think one of the reasons is sometimes people are confused about what Ofqual is responsible for, what the Department is responsible, and what the exam boards are responsible for. I think being clear about those responsibilities is really important. You are right, of course, the Government may make changes, and the regulator has to make a tough decision about whether those changes impact on its ability to meet its statutory objectives. If there is something in those changes that means that standards are

compromised, or that we cannot promote sufficiently, then we have stand up and shout, and I am fully prepared to do that.

Q14 Ian Mearns: In terms of building relationships with the different sectors that we are working with schools and colleges, the schools' map is probably as complex as it has been in the post-war period, in terms of we have now academies, free schools, maintained schools, voluntary aided schools, you name it, we have it out there. How are you going to build bridges in order to have some clear lines of communication with such a diverse field?

Sally Collier: Good question. I guess I would use the analogy of my current landscape, 50,000 contracting authorities and 230,000 suppliers. What do you do? You work through the collaborative bodies, of which I know there are many in this sector, so you look for those who have channels that you can get your messages out. I have been really impressed in the last few days looking at how Ofqual are using social media to get their messages out. I think it is probably a multi-layered approach. At the top of the shop I would look to be developing really productive relationships with all those people. Then it is about using those networks appropriately, and then there is: how can we use social media and other communications to get our message out?

Q15 Ian Mearns: Part of the problem of dealing with such a complex landscape is that you might be effectively communicating with some people who other people might think do not represent them.

Sally Collier: Yes. 'Twas ever thus. I think it is 80/20. Are you reaching most of the people that have a representative voice? You cannot meet everybody, but it is about: are you getting your message out to the majority, and are you talking to the right people? I am sure you will help me with who those people are.

Q16 Catherine McKinnell: Your predecessor told the Committee that the pace of change to GCSEs and A levels was eye watering. She did clarify that the pace was one that Ofqual was keeping up with, but obviously you are taking on this role amid quite significant reforms. What do you see as being the main, immediate challenges on taking the role?

Sally Collier: Clearly the most immediate challenge is accreditation of the specifications for this summer. It is an intensive period of reform. I am informed this morning that 77 of the specifications are now approved. There is a small number of subjects where there is not yet one specification approved, although they are on many iterations. I think the reform is making really good progress, but clearly that will be one of my first priorities, seeing that reform through effectively, efficiently, so that at the end of the period our students can get their qualifications on time. The pride of their standards is a massive attraction as part of the job for me.

Q17 Catherine McKinnell: Ofqual have obviously played a very prominent role in the reforms that have been taking place over the last few years, which you will be part of delivering. In terms of the short-term to medium-term landscape, what do you see as additional challenges or your role in Ofqual over the next five years?

Sally Collier: I have been thinking about this. How will success be judged? What do we need to focus on? Clearly the reform programme of general qualifications does play

central in that. I think Ofqual has a much bigger remit that is often forgotten in terms of the regulation of other qualifications, apprenticeships, for example. I would like to—I will not say take more of an interest; that is the wrong term—have more of an equal focus on the work of Ofqual over the broad spectrum of its remit. I would like to look back and say, “Not only did we play a part in the general qualifications, but we played a part in raising the standard of much wider qualifications”. At the end of the period not everybody might like us, but are we a trusted and respected regulator? I think that is all any regulator would want.

Q18 Catherine McKinnell: Good. It is reassuring to hear in terms of broadening the focus. Without a doubt the most immediate challenge is bedding in the reforms to GCSE and A levels. What do you see as the key challenges in seeing that through to the end?

Sally Collier: I have limited knowledge here, but the immediate challenge is having specifications accredited that teachers can teach, and then there is assessing the marks when they come out, and then any follow up from that and any—I don’t know what the correct term is yet—re-marking. I know there is a consultation out at the moment about re-marking. When those results come out from the new reforms they will be hugely scrutinised, there will be a new marking system for GCSEs, so ensuring that Ofqual has played its role effectively and that the system has delivered without great changes or mishaps on the way. There will, of course, be issues, but it is about smooth, effective introduction of those reforms.

Q19 Catherine McKinnell: Just to put it into context, your role over the next five years will be to make sure that these reforms are seen through. For those young people taking those exams it is their one and only opportunity, and obviously the impact on them of anything going wrong in terms of the process is really massive. Do you find that prospect daunting in any way at this stage?

Sally Collier: “Daunting” is perhaps the wrong word. I feel the weight of what this organisation is expected to do, and we all know the impact of students having their qualifications when they want them. I feel it, but daunted, no. Challenged, yes; excited about the challenge, absolutely.

Q20 Ian Mearns: *The Times Education* recently reported that Ofqual is considering a major grading shakeup alongside the current exam reforms to try to ensure grades in all subjects are of equivalent value. Since we are anticipating a report later this year around measures that Ofqual might take to ensure subject parity at GCSE and A level, what is your view on improving the comparability of grades?

Sally Collier: I do not feel I can comment on that. I will end up saying something that will turn out probably not to be right. We need to ensure that standards are high—that is our statutory objective—and that standards are comparable. It would seem that we do not have huge disparity in what a student is expected to do in one subject in terms of strength of difficulty versus another subject. That seems to be a very complex thing to try to achieve, and I will need to get my head around that when I take the job in late April.

Q21 Ian Mearns: That is an interesting answer, because it seems like the organisation that you are going to be heading up is considering a major grading shakeup. Reform of how grades are awarded could cause further disruption to a system that is already under significant strain. Can schools, students, and exam boards cope with more change at the moment, do you think?

Sally Collier: I do not know the answer to that. All I know is there is an intensive programme of reform going on where there has been grading, letters to numbers, changes in GSCEs. That is what I am responsible for implementing. If there are further grading changes planned—and I don't know that—it will follow the proper course of consultation and we will balance the weight of what schools are being asked to do. One of you asked me earlier about: what you do if the Government are pushing for something where the pace of reform is too much? If the pace of reform is too much there is a risk to standards, and that is where Ofqual has to step out and say, "This is unachievable."

Q22 Ian Mearns: I think you see yourself having a steep learning curve between now and taking up your appointment.

Sally Collier: Between now and when I take up, and in the immediate weeks when I take up the appointment, yes, indeed.

Q23 William Wragg: Just to follow on from what Ian said there, this idea of comparability of subjects, if I was to reduce it to the level that we are saying that there are "hard" subjects and "easy" subjects, and getting a grade A in a hard subject or an easy subject. In your opinion at the moment, is there a risk of comparing apples and pears or is it a case that you can define what is a hard or an easy subject?

Sally Collier: The same answer as to your colleague: I don't know the answer to that, and I am not going to sit here and say you are comparing apples and pears. Clearly, from a point of reference probably the same as yours, you would say that is inherently difficult to do that. What I would say is that the regulator is responsible for maintaining those standards and comparability of standards. I think it has moved a long way over the last few years in looking at comparability across subjects and across exam boards, for example. It is right that it continues to push for making sure those standards are comparable. As for the specifics of what might happen in the coming months, I don't know yet.

Q24 Chair: This comparability issue is quite a complicated one, and it is reasonable to say—as you have—that you would need to really drill down into the detail. I suppose the question behind William's point is: how will you manage to get these things across to the wider public, and obviously the stakeholders, such as teachers and pupils?

Sally Collier: Yes, I agree with you. What I can see that has happened in the last weeks and months is that Ofqual has reached out in forms of communication that have done a great job in turning very complex areas, not in layman's terms, but in simple, digestible, bite-sized chunks. I am sure you have all read the postcards. I think that is an excellent mechanism to get messages out. Yesterday I was looking at a short video about comparable outcomes with the Chair of the Standards Board. You take the expert, you make it into digestible, bite-sized chunks, and you get it out as widely as possible across the system, so it is possible.

Q25 Chair: Right. In terms of exam boards and all of the other parts of this process, you feel that you would be able to get to grips with comparability, to the point that everyone was satisfied that Ofqual was understanding it and making it clear that it was workable and also transparent for everybody involved?

Sally Collier: I think you asked: can I get to a point where everybody is satisfied? Probably that is an expectation too far. I can get to a point where you take a complex subject—and clearly I need to understand it in full—and take those messages and test. Part of this process is testing with the community whether what we are saying is digestible and understandable. If we cannot do that about our work, then we are doing something wrong, and we need to step back, adjust, and see how we can do that. In order to meet our statutory objectives, which are to promote confidence in standards and confidence in the system, we have to get those messages out in a way that is understood.

Q26 Lucy Frazer: In answer to Ian's question I think you very sensibly refused to be drawn on an issue that you did not feel comfortable with, and I see the sense in that. But you have just said that you had a seminar yesterday on the very subject, which was comparability. If the issue is that students who are taking GCSEs now in 2017 might get a different grade than they would have had they done the old GCSE, is it right to bring up an equivalent so that they are not prejudiced by the fact that they are the first takers of the GCSE? Is that what you were discussing yesterday?

Sally Collier: No, two different things. I watched a nine-minute video, which many stakeholders will watch—which is an excellent video—about comparable outcomes for the first set of results coming out this year. It is a framework that has been used for a number of years. The questions that colleagues were asking me earlier were about comparability between subjects. I did not answer the question on comparability between subjects, because I really do not have enough detail to answer. In terms of the use of the framework of comparable outcomes and students getting a mark under the new regime, what we do not want, of course—and the whole point of this—is that somebody undertaking a new exam with a new curriculum and newly taught is not prejudiced and disadvantaged by so doing. That is the whole point of comparable outcomes. Not just comparable outcomes, there is a whole range of data that is used then to set grade boundaries so that they are comparable. My understanding is it is absolutely not a straightjacket. It is not a straightjacket. If exam boards feel that marks have changed and there is a good reason for that, then they can make recommendations to do so.

Q27 Chair: Thank you. In contrast to that conversation, of course, is another pressure, and that is the pace of reforms. That is certainly one problem. What do you think is the best balance in terms of pace and the reassurance you can give to stakeholders generally that they are going in the right direction and you are recognising their interests and concerns? In other words, do you think the quick fix is the way, or do you think that a gentler approach is necessary?

Sally Collier: Probably neither of those. A quick fix is never good because they can potentially, in the role of a regulator, compromise standards. I go back to one of my earlier answers: if we look at accreditation, are we likely to get enough subjects accredited so that teachers have sufficient time to teach? I have said I think good progress is being made. If there comes a point where the potential for Ofqual to fulfil its role is compromised, then

clearly it is a decision for the Ofqual board to say, “No, a different approach needs to be taken.”

Q28 Chair: Right. This question of communication has revolved around this discussion so far quite a lot. What would you do to improve Ofqual’s reputation in terms of communication? It is all very well saying, “We communicate,” but the reputation is not so good, as we have heard already. What steps would you take to improve it?

Sally Collier: I will go back to my pyramid. I think relationships at the top of all the various stakeholder organisations are important, and that is for me to do. That is a new relationship; I think it is a new opportunity. Then I think the use of social media is relatively new and it is a very powerful one. There are multiple layers of communication and, as I said, I will have an open mind about listening to concerns. Of course, it is my intention that we would want to improve those perceptions and reputation, while coming back to: we will not please all of the people all of the time.

Q29 Michelle Donelan: We touched on this before, the current system of the three very revenue-driven, big exam boards for GCSE and the A levels, do you think that that is something that is fit for purpose in the long term?

Sally Collier: That is not for me to comment on. The Government will decide what system they want. It is for the regulator to regulate that system.

Q30 Michelle Donelan: Given the commercial experience that you already have to date, how would you rate the financial state of the exam boards, looking at it from your background?

Sally Collier: I have not looked at the financial state of these exam boards, but clearly I bring a lot of commercial experience in understanding markets, understanding how markets work, understanding drivers and incentives, and I will be interested in understanding that.

Q31 Chair: Can I go back to your answer to Michelle’s first question about the three board systems and so on, because that was relevant to the question I asked you earlier. What role do you think you and Ofqual should be playing in any reformulation of exam-board systems or whatever? In other words, what contribution would you want to make to a debate or a set of policy changes about exam boards generally?

Sally Collier: As I said, I think it is for the Government to decide what the system of exam boards is. How many there are, what they do, that is a matter for the Government. Ofqual may in due course have an opinion on that. It will have an opinion on it in the context of meeting its statutory objectives. If any proposed system of reform compromises the standards—you yourselves mentioned the pace of reform, and we already have a big change of qualifications, both in content and assessment. In the context of meeting its objectives, Ofqual will certainly have a view but it is not for me to have that view at this point in time.

Q32 William Wragg: Again, I come back to the issue of comparability. If you have the three exam boards, clearly a comparison can be drawn. What would you say if there was

anecdotal evidence that schools and colleges, et cetera, changed the exam board for which they enter students upon the basis that there was a perception that one of those exam boards' examinations were easier?

Sally Collier: I think this is an area where Ofqual has done a lot of work, and we talked about comparability between the subjects. I think Ofqual has done a lot of work on comparability between exam boards. I understand there is recently published research on the maths GCSE in comparability, for example. There is a framework that has been put in place to reduce that difference between the exam boards. It is clearly not ideal but, coming back to the higher level of comparable outcomes, there will be differences in exams. Not the curriculum but the types of questions asked, of course there will be differences. Ofqual's job is to look at comparability between them, but then there is the safeguard of the wider comparable outcomes piece.

Q33 Chair: Are you satisfied with the scope and range of tools that you have to do the job in Ofqual?

Sally Collier: May I come back to you, Mr Chairman, to tell you whether I am satisfied with those tools? I don't know. I have certainly been very impressed by the management team. I don't know about the resources available to me yet but I will certainly shout if I have an issue with those.

Q34 Chair: Let's ask a hypothetical question then. If after about four or five months you thought, "We need more powers", or a different range of powers, what steps would you take?

Sally Collier: That would certainly be a matter for the Ofqual board. If we decided that that was an avenue we wanted to pursue—and I am not sure of the route by which we would get there and to what extent it involves the Government, involves this Committee—I don't know the precise route by which we would get there, but I would certainly have no qualms in raising that with a proposed change in regulatory power, or indeed a change in tools or resources if that was needed.

Q35 Chair: Do you have any examples where you have really challenged the structure that you have led or been part of?

Sally Collier: Challenged the structure? Yes. In the organisation that I lead currently, the Crown Commercial Service, when it was brought together I lobbied very hard. It is a buying organisation. I lobbied very hard for the policy function relating to commercial activity to be brought together with the delivery function. There were very strong opponents to that. I very much felt that if Ministers could set policy that was then driven through £13 billion-worth of spend, we would get much better policy and we would get more effective policy. That is not quite the same, but it is an example of lobbying for something.

Another example is that I also lobbied Ministers who were under enormous pressure to bring in the new procurement regulations ahead of any other member state and ahead of time. I challenged very strongly on the basis that we needed good law, not quick law. We did it quickly but we did it at a pace that meant that we have good law.

Q36 Lucy Frazer: I think I heard you say at the beginning that you were the CEO for two years and now you are looking for a new challenge. Do you think that is quite a short period of time to be in a CEO role, or is that the sort of time you think appropriate?

Sally Collier: It is slightly strange, because I was managing director of the largest component part, so I have done three years in charge of the same organisation, in effect. As you know, I have been in public procurement for a long time. I have loved what I have done. I have built this organisation. I hope it is making a significant contribution to the financial deficit, and it is now ready. I guess the juncture was the next Spending Review period because I wanted to get it on the map, get it settlement agreed and send it off. Then I would have been doing the same thing again. I guess it is the right point in time. It was not just having been the CEO; it was having been in this space for a long time.

Q37 Lucy Frazer: It is clear from what you have just said and from what you have said in the course of earlier answers that you relish a challenge. How long will it be before you feel that you have satisfied the challenge that is Ofqual?

Sally Collier: I don't know. This is a five-year term, so I anticipate it taking that long. I don't think I can tell you any more than that. It is clearly not a short-term role. There is a lot to do and it is a big challenge.

Q38 Lucy Frazer: A student is at school for about 15 years, whereas your term is five, and the term of a Minister might be similar. Do you think there is a dichotomy between those two things where there is significant change maybe one or two times during the course of a student's career at school?

Sally Collier: Potentially, in that there are pros and cons of continued leadership for a number of years. I think this Committee will have a part to play in assessing that at the end of my five-year term. There are certainly big programmes that can be delivered in that time but I can see both sides, and you would have to judge me on outcomes during that period to say: is it beneficial to have continuity or not? I can see the challenge.

Q39 Stephen Timms: A new grading scale of 9 to 1 is going to be introduced for new GCSE rather than the current A* to G. What do you think are the pros and cons of that change?

Sally Collier: My understanding of the reasons for that change? I think this is a very good example of the Government and the regulator working effectively together. The Government expectations were that there was more differentiation between the previous grades. There was less bunching in those middle areas. I think Ofqual's interpretation of that was to set a numerical scale. The pros of that are that it is different. If you would have had a similar alphabet scale you would have then said, "Is that C the same as the previous C?" I think that would have caused confusion. I think there are merits to having a different scale. I think it has met its purpose in elongating that scale. The disadvantages of that are, of course, it is different and it needs to be widely communicated so that people can see where there is comparability so that student can say, "Okay, I now have a 4, I now have a 7, and this is what it means," and it carries that weight. I think the postcards do that very well.

Q40 Stephen Timms: I would like to go a bit further on that. You will have a central role in supporting a stable and sustainable qualifications system. That is going to involve some quite difficult judgments, and I wonder if I could give you an example of one of those. We had a memorandum from one of the awarding bodies. This is the discussion of comparable outcomes that you have already talked about. They say this to us, “To avoid unfairness to students who happen to be in the first cohort taking the new qualification, Ofqual has determined that awarding in 2017 for the new GCSEs and A level will be based on the comparable outcomes approach, which ensures that grade boundaries are set, such that for students with a given level of prior attainment the same proportion will achieve a grade in the new qualification as they would have done in the old one”. This body is particularly concerned. They say, “Teachers in schools will not fully understand how to support students through the changes, as there will be severe limitations on describing the standard for each grade in terms of the performance students will need to demonstrate in the assessments”. I wonder what you think is the more important consideration here. Is it the statistical fairness, which I understand is what comparable outcomes is intended to achieve, or is it clarity for teachers about what is needed to obtain a given grade?

Sally Collier: I am not sure it is that simple a trade off. I think it is both. Clearly comparable outcomes are intended to do just that, to protect students from having huge shifts in their likely grades because of the new qualifications. But we do need to communicate, and not just Ofqual. I think the system, the Government and the exam boards need to be very clear with schools so that their students know what the new system means and what they are likely to achieve. As I said before, I think there is a bit of confusion about this being a straightjacket. This is not, “You must have a certain proportion of grades at A to C.” There is flexibility in the system. If exam boards feel that grades have shifted then they can make cases to demonstrate that improvement.

Q41 William Wragg: Perhaps we can round off on this; going back to perhaps the slightly poor joke I had at the beginning about “Yes, Minister” and “No, Minister”. Could you give us an example of a time when you said directly to a Minister, “No”? When was that, for what purpose, and what was the outcome?

Sally Collier: I will come back to my example on implementing new procurement regulations, where a Minister wanted an incredibly, incredibly short timescale, where I personally went back to the Minister and said, “Here is the implication if you have it in that incredibly short timescale. We want to be swift, we want to get ahead of the game compared to other countries, but here is a realistic timetable for when you can have these regulations laid.” That was a direct example where I challenged a Minister.

Q42 William Wragg: Just to push it one step further, would you say that is analogous with the situation at Ofqual in terms of the pace of change as well?

Sally Collier: Yes. I use that because I think it is a particularly relevant example.

Q43 Chair: At the beginning of the session—and you repeated later—you accepted you don’t fully understand the whole system of qualifications and assessment, and you would be relying on your experts for a while at least. At what point would you be able to come to the Committee or feel really comfortable about your knowledge and expertise in this sector? How would you be able to express, “I have really got a hold of this one”?

Sally Collier: I don't know the answer to that. It is not a long time but neither is it a few weeks in. If I may, Mr Chairman, after consulting with my colleagues, could I write to you and tell you when that might be an appropriate time to do so?

Q44 Chair: Okay. If you thought, though, that you needed to speed it up, how would you do that?

Sally Collier: I think it is going to be pretty speedy. I don't think there is any other option other than speedy. I have an intensive induction programme. In my head, it is not weeks and it is not years. It is probably a small number of months before I can—

Chair: Yes, just to point out that in August there will be loads of envelopes flying around this country with examination results.

Sally Collier: There will indeed.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much indeed.

Sally Collier: Did you want me to answer that one?

Chair: No, I was just making an observation. Thank you very much. Does anyone have any further questions? No. Thank you very much indeed for coming along today.