

Education Committee

Oral evidence: The impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services, HC 254

Wednesday 22 July 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 22 July 2020.

[Watch the meeting](#)

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

Questions 853 - 941

Witnesses

I: Kiran Gill CEO at The Difference; Peter Sandiford, CEO at the Independent Children's Homes Association; and Kevin Williams, CEO at The Fostering Network

II: John Coughlan CBE, Chief Executive at Hampshire County Council; Yvette Stanley, National Director for Social Care at Ofsted; and Ian Thomas CBE, Chief Executive at Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Peter Sandiford, CEO at the Independent Children's Homes Association](#)
- [Peter Sandiford, CEO at the Independent Children's Homes Association](#)

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Kiran Gill, Peter Sandiford and Kevin Williams

Q853 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone. Welcome to our Select Committee today. For the benefit of the tape and those watching on the internet, could you kindly introduce yourselves and your title? Could I start with you, Kevin, please?

Kevin Williams: I am Kevin Williams, Chief Executive of The Fostering Network. The Fostering Network is the UK's leading charity supporting foster carers and fostering services.

Kiran Gill: Kiran Gill. I am the Chief Executive of The Difference. We are an education charity focused on developing specialist leadership in schools to reduce exclusion and improve outcomes for excluded learners.

Peter Sandiford: Peter Sandiford. I am the Chief Executive of the Independent Children's Homes Association. We represent approximately 70% of the residential childcare independent sector—that is, charities and private organisations.

Q854 **Chair:** Because of the time constraints of broadcasting, could I ask you to be as concise as possible in your answers today? I know there is so much to say and I do mean that politely and gently.

A study in June by the University College London Institute of Education suggested that overall one-fifth of pupils, over 2 million children, had not done any schoolwork at home or had managed less than an hour a day during lockdown. What has been going on during the pandemic in support for looked-after children? Have they been offered additional support? Would you like to start off, Peter?

Peter Sandiford: I think it has been varied, depending on the relationship with schools and also the messages that the children's homes were getting about lockdown and how they make the children and the staff safe.

Some homes have sent children into school. Others have not. I would say probably the majority have not and they have accessed work from the schools. The homes that have tried to get the children into school have met with varying results. Sometimes the schools have said that the children are better off and safer at home.

From the children's points of view, they are getting conflicting messages: that there is a lockdown and you have very limited contact outside of your home, yet the expectation of going to school. Those things have been quite difficult to deal with, without very clear guidance coming to them from the centre.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kevin Williams: Could I start by saying that I think the foster carers have responded fantastically to what is a really difficult situation during this time?

The evidence we are gathering, as with Peter, is of a mixed picture. Different local authorities and different schools are responding very differently. We undertook a survey of foster carers to ask their opinions about what has happened during lockdown. Disappointingly, 62% said they had had no contact from the virtual school head. We find that really difficult to understand. It may be the virtual schools are working in the background, supporting schools and individual teachers, but we found the lack of contact with foster carers and young people disappointing.

I also think it is true that there was a mixed message. Government's message that all those pupils with a social worker should attend school was a blunt instrument. Clearly, foster carers and people in fostering households have a variety of different needs. Some of our foster carers were self-isolating. There were difficult messages around birth children being asked to stay at home while foster children go to school, for example, that notion of single approach, when we know that foster care covers a variety of young people, some of whom are in a long-term or permanent setting, which is a very stable placement for them.

As for the education, there was that mixed response from schools. I agree with Peter that for some of our most complex children, when foster carers have asked for the children to return to school, they have been advised not to return them and that was basically due to a concern from schools about pupils' ability to self-isolate and concerns that schools might need to use restraint.

Q855 **Chair:** Before I come on to Kiran, and I will bring you in, I have a follow-up about the assessment that you have all made of the impact of the pandemic on children's and young people's education outcomes and how this is different for looked-after children. Kiran, could you answer both questions and then I will come on to the others?

Kiran Gill: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the Committee for having me here. It is great to be speaking to your Committee in this Parliament and to see you continuing to shine a light on the most important issues.

I would start by widening what we are talking about and would urge the Committee to look beyond just looked-after children, because the recent Children in Need review published by the Department for Education in the last Parliament made very clear that children who have previously had a social worker, particularly those on child protection plans, have as poor an educational outcome as those who are looked after.

As for what has happened under Covid, my charity focuses on exclusions and we published a big report with IPPR, but I was also an adviser and did some research for the Timpson review. Time and again, when looking at who gets excluded and why, it is the case that it is often children who



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have experienced trauma, which can be proxied by an interaction with social services. Those children who have interacted with social services are 20 times more likely to be excluded because experiences of domestic violence, parental serious mental ill health, substance misuse, and so on, can lead to mental health problems for children, which they can struggle to understand and cope with, particularly when returning to school.

In terms of Covid's impact on children nationally, and particularly on this group, I would say that there is increased vulnerability and schools need to be aware of who their vulnerable learners are and be resourced to deal with what will potentially be quite difficult behaviour on return as a result of mental health problems for those young people.

I would like to congratulate the Government in deciding that schools ought to remain open for vulnerable learners, including those with a social worker. I know the implementation has had challenges, but where it has worked best we have seen schools making robust risk assessments and really understanding their cohort. I think that is very significant because the key message I would like to communicate to the Select Committee is that this group is not fully visible in England's schools.

If children have a special educational need, and an education health care plan, the front-line teacher knows that; it is on their register. The governors hold that school to account. It is highly visible for Ofsted and also visible in national data sets. That is children with special needs. If children come from low-income homes, also a vulnerable group, that is clear, again, on the register for governors, Ofsted and national Government. But until very recently, when this Children in Need review was published last year, we did not know how many children nationally had interacted with a social worker but had not gone into care. That is very significant because at the moment, if you are a classroom teacher, your register does not necessarily tell you who is vulnerable, and we know that these children are most likely to drop out of education and have long-term poor adult outcomes.

Q856 Chair: Other organisations we have had before the Select Committee, such as the Safeguarding Alliance, suggest there are new frontiers of vulnerable children that the pandemic has highlighted: children exposed to online harms, mental health crises, domestic violence, and so on. Do you all think that the Government's definition of "vulnerable children" for the purposes of DfE guidance to education providers and partners helps sufficiently to identify and protect every child at risk during the pandemic, or does the definition need to be widened?

Kevin Williams: I can see an argument for widening the definition. My worry about widening it is what that does to those children who are looked after by the state. When the state intervenes in family life, it has a particular duty to make sure that those children are very well protected. If there is a widening of the definition, then that widening needs to come with the extra resourcing that will be required to support the wider group. My anxiety would be that we widen the definition but there is a lack of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

resources to support it and, therefore, a diminution of the resource for looked-after children.

Peter Sandiford: As well as widening the resource, which I agree with Kevin about, a lot of our children are finding it really hard to even access a school placement. They are being placed in a children's home and then it is taking, for many, up to six months to get them into a school place in the first place.

There is a clear promise to our children who are in state care that their education will continue and will be prioritised but, at the same time, will be prioritised in terms of their assessed need. Many of the children who have had the early-life trauma that children coming into the care system have had need to build relationships with their carers in a planned way and have a gradual integration back into education. That is where there has often been failure historically, so it is about how we can pick up that previous history.

Q857 **Chair:** This is specifically to you, Kiran, and related to the question I have just asked. I think Oxford University's Department of Education highlighted in a report that there are potentially new and heightened risks for school exclusions caused by Covid. Do you agree? You mentioned this a moment ago, but which groups of children do you believe are now most at risk of being excluded? Also, do you anticipate school exclusion figures will rise or fall as pupils return to school and how can mainstream schools be incentivised and held accountable for supporting those at risk of exclusion at those times? Sorry, there is a lot of stuff in there.

Kiran Gill: That is perfect. In answer to one of your latter questions, we absolutely are concerned that the numbers of excluded children will rise because there are many, many more children who will have experienced the kinds of traumas that we know can escalate into challenging behaviours, particularly if schools do not feel confident and equipped to recognise that trauma is the cause of that behaviour challenge and to intervene appropriately and therapeutically by brokering in other services.

We are concerned, as a charity, that the numbers of exclusions will rise and we are concerned that there need to be two things to address it. First, in mainstream schools, we do need more resource and accountability for those most vulnerable children.

Chair, you asked about widening the definition of vulnerability. I think schools are best placed to analyse their cohorts and understand the nuances of who is becoming more vulnerable and why, but I do think the state can help specifically by giving extra resource to those young people whose needs have reached the threshold of a child protection plan. We support EPI's suggestion, which they brought to the Select Committee earlier in the summer, that child protection plan children should also get extra funding, which we think should be called a vulnerability premium,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

creating more accountability for those young people and trying to incentivise intervention preventatively so that their needs do not escalate towards exclusion.

That is mainstream, but I would also like to emphasise that the particular concern that we have around exclusions rising is that currently pupil referral units around the country are not resourced to cope with that increase.

Q858 Chair: In the survey you did with the CSJ, I think you suggested that the excluded pupils who were at significant risk of criminal or sexual exploitation have no school, college or training place to go to in September. What should be done about this? There is a Department for Education grant of £750 per pupil to help students leave AP transition. Is that enough? What should happen to children moving on from Year 11 who have been in AP or PRUs to support their post-16 education and help them to progress?

Kiran Gill: We, and our schools, are very grateful for that transition fund but conscious that it is not enough. Previously, in normal conditions, it was the case that almost one in two pupils immediately became NEET at 16, despite being legally entitled to statutory education until 18. In normal times, half of the pupil population that has been excluded is NEET.

What our pupil referral unit colleagues are telling us is that this fund may help them get back to those pre-Covid figures, but that it will not address this group of young people who are very vulnerable to unemployment and also, as you say, Chair, to criminal exploitation. This is what our pupil referral unit heads are telling us.

Q859 Chair: What needs to be done?

Kiran Gill: We think there needs to be continued funding but this funding should not be one off. We also urge the Department for Education to set up a trailblazer programme to look at the pupil referral units that do improve pupils' NEET likelihood, reduce their NEET likelihood, and help them get into employment so that we can understand what works.

Q860 Chair: What should the funding total be?

Kiran Gill: The funding total? I do not have those figures in front of me—I am sorry, Chair—but I can send them on to the Committee because we have done that work with the CSJ.

I also want to flag that we are very worried that increased numbers of excluded pupils will throw some pupil referral units into special measures. When we worked with IPPR, we saw that. We saw that those schools were twice as likely to have unqualified teachers and twice as likely to have supply teachers compared to mainstream schools, and once there was an influx of exclusions, often conditions spiralled and became very worrying. We would urge the Department for Education to look at pupil



HOUSE OF COMMONS

funding to anticipate a bulge in exclusions, making sure that pupil referral units can access that funding.

Q861 Ian Mearns: At the outset, I should declare an interest. It is not a financial interest, but I am chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Foster Care Work. We established it a couple of years ago.

I am interested to find out from you what you think has happened to referral rates for child protection cases and for children coming into care during the lockdown. Is there a national picture or is it a patchwork quilt, like so many other things? Kevin, do you want to go first?

Kevin Williams: I think there has been a decline in referrals. What we know is that most referrals come from professionals, so that is when children are visible in schools and visible to health services, the police, and so on. We have noticed that decline.

It is difficult to know what will happen when there is a return to school, but my anticipation is that there will be a sudden spike in referrals and an increase in the number of young people coming into the care system, or in need of protection plans.

That said, I think the Committee needs to pay attention to what that means in terms of resources. We know that during the lockdown foster carers have suffered financially, and there is a need for support for foster carers to continue. The focus needs to be on the retention of the existing foster care workforce as well as recruitment of new foster carers. I am happy to expand on any of those areas.

Peter Sandiford: In residential, we initially saw referral rates fall, if anything, but more recently they have started to go back up again. Initially, it was for older children and trying to find placements for them was extremely difficult in terms of matching with the children's homes' statements of purpose. I have heard anecdotally about increased placements in unregistered provision. We have heard of an increase in younger children coming from placement disruptions.

Kiran Gill: I understand that the Association of Directors of Children's Services has found that the numbers of referrals to social care have fallen and that a lot of the numbers that have fallen have been from schools, which is part of the reason we expect that, once schools reopen, there will be an increased number of recognitions of pupils whose needs have escalated and whose safety has declined. That goes hand in hand with increased exclusion.

Q862 Ian Mearns: So that means that children's services departments need to be prepared for a blip—a significant rise in referrals.

Do you think that over the years leading up to this the thresholds for interventions from children's services departments have gone up because of demand?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Peter Sandiford: I think there has been a significant drop in early intervention. Something that I have championed for a long time, and our members would, is using residential care a lot earlier rather than repeat fostering placements with breakdown after breakdown, which then, after 10 placements, go into residential. Residential being used as an early intervention with a move into fostering or back into their families could have been more effective, and in the long term a lot cheaper, too, but in terms of the children's needs could have met those needs much earlier when there was potential to turn things round.

Q863 **Ian Mearns:** That indicates, therefore, that it seems as if thresholds for intervention have gone up, because they are not able to deal with youngsters earlier. Kevin, you have your hand up?

Kevin Williams: It is worth recognising that over the last decade we have seen a lot of cuts to local authority budgets and those cuts have often had an impact on the early intervention programmes rather than the statutory duties, with local authorities being forced into just responding to statutory duties, as a result of which, I think, interventions have changed.

What I would say in defence of social workers and others is that we have got much, much better at understanding what are the best interventions to make with children and families, who are the children that are most in need of support by the state and in need of looked-after status.

There is a double-edged sword, but I absolutely would recognise that cuts to local authority budgets have had the worst impact on early intervention programmes and that increases the long-term cost to the state.

Ian Mearns: Kiran, do you want to come in on that question as well?

Kiran Gill: As well as pupil referral units, we represent mainstream schools that are trying to improve their practices to drive down escalation to exclusion. Anecdotally, they say that it can be challenging and that it has sometimes been particularly challenging over lockdown to access early help in some local authorities. I think this is an area in which schools are stepping in. We have definitely seen that during lockdown; schools are going above and beyond and doing some fantastic work with families.

However, I think we need to resource that work when schools come back if we are not to see a huge hit in terms of increasing numbers of children struggling to get their basic qualifications in English and maths, rising exclusion and rising escalation towards going into care.

I think the Government should build on the social workers in schools programme, and I particularly believe that there should be a vulnerability premium in parallel with the pupil premium, which would recognise children who have experienced trauma and could fund schools to do some of this early help work that local authorities are now struggling to do.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ian Mearns: Peter, you wanted to come back in?

Peter Sandiford: Children returning in September is quite a concern both to our members and also I am talking here on behalf of the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers, with whom we did a joint report to you. One of the common themes has been those children being settled and a lot of them feeling a lot more emotionally held within their care setting and building relationships with their carers. As they go back into school, the concern is about how much they are going to have their emotional needs met as they go through that transition. The virtual school heads are concerned about that and how schools can be trauma informed.

Q864 **Ian Mearns:** What this picture is portraying to me is that all the stakeholders need to be working very closely together to prevent a major spike in exclusions for vulnerable kids because that is a real danger on the return to school.

Peter Sandiford: Yes, I totally agree with you.

Chair: I am going to bring in Caroline Johnson, because I suspect her question is related, and then perhaps Kevin, if you could answer first.

Q865 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** My question relates to something that was said by, I think, Peter in response to Ian about the thresholds increasing over time and potentially related to resources. Do you see geographical variation? Do you see child protection plans and care being provided at different thresholds in different parts of the country?

Peter Sandiford: I have not identified that clearly. I have not done the research to identify that, so I would not like to comment.

Kevin Williams: Yes, we certainly see geographical variation in the numbers of children coming into care, and the numbers in foster care, and the way that foster carers are supported.

I was going to go back to the earlier question, Chair—

Chair: Briefly, please, because we have a lot to get through.

Kevin Williams: During lockdown, only 32% of foster carers said that they had had weekly contact from schools and 14% said that during the lockdown period they had had absolutely no contact. So I would absolutely support what has been said previously about the need, when we do go back to school, to think about the emotional needs of children as they return because of the early-life trauma that they would have suffered.

I think it is also worth saying that there is a likelihood of a second lockdown and what we have learned from the first lockdown, when we went into it in crisis, is that we can better plan for it. We would like to see all looked-after children having a PEP during the early autumn term, and that PEP should look at both what has happened during lockdown, and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the lack of learning that has happened potentially, but also a plan B for what distance learning would happen, what home schooling could happen, if there is a second lockdown or local lockdown.

Q866 **Chair:** Should that have happened at the beginning? Did you say 40% or 14%? Could you give that figure again?

Kevin Williams: It was 14%, one-four, who had had no contact from their school during the entire lockdown period.

Q867 **Chair:** How many had had contact for more than an hour, a few hours a week, or whatever? Do you have any other figures?

Kevin Williams: We had 32% of foster carers who said they had had contact with the school weekly and that meant that 86% had some contact during the lockdown period, but about 50% of that was not weekly.

Chair: Ian, have you finished with your questions?

Ian Mearns: Yes, thank you very much.

Q868 **Chair:** Before I come on to David Simmonds—I was going to ask this at the end, but it is quite relevant now—if, God forbid, we were in a second lockdown and in a second wave, what would you each recommend should happen from day one, from the Department for Education?

Kevin Williams: I don't think it is about what happens on day one of the lockdown. I think we should anticipate that there could be a lockdown and, therefore, plan and prepare for that now. That is why I am suggesting that every looked-after child has a PEP, and part of that PEP is to think about a plan B should there need to be a return to home schooling because of a lockdown either nationally or locally. That should include what resources are available, including IT equipment. We think the response from the DfE to get computers and other work to foster carers was very slow.

Q869 **Chair:** Kiran, we know that although AP settings were meant to be open, some of them were not. What should happen if we are in this position again?

Kiran Gill: It is clear that there is a push to think about catch-up and recognition that poorer children have been affected by not having access to laptops. I would hope that we are able to roll out the laptop programme for learners.

I think what is becoming clearer, and is not fully recognised by the Department for Education and across schools, is that those most likely to have no qualifications, to be vulnerable to unemployment, to be vulnerable to criminal and other exploitation, the challenges that we really do not need in our society and in our economy going forward—

Q870 **Chair:** What should happen?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kiran Gill: We need accountability for those children in the form of a vulnerability premium that asks schools to look specifically at who those children are and what they are doing.

Q871 **Chair:** How much? How much should that be per head?

Kiran Gill: We have calculated that it should be the same as the looked-after child premium, but we are exploring whether some of that could be given directly to schools to change how they are supporting those children.

Q872 **Chair:** Peter, what should happen?

Peter Sandiford: I agree with Kevin about the anticipation. I would love to see different Government Departments coming together with a cohesive response. What we had last time was children being grouped together with adult social care and a total lack of clarity in terms of guidance. That is important.

Q873 **David Simmonds:** I want to go back to the issue about foster carers and placement routes and ask what your view is about the impact of the lockdown on the ability of placements to be made, and moves to be made, when they need to happen.

A secondary part of that question is whether you have a view about whether there are any variations between independent providers, IFAs, and independent providers of children's homes, and local authorities when it comes to their ability to manage that process.

Kevin Williams: In terms of foster carers, what we have learnt from lockdown is that a large number of foster carers are telling us that their relationship with the young people they care for has strengthened during this time—that young people have felt more settled, more stable, that they are not having to face the day to day pressures of school and social interaction, and all of those things.

There are some things that we have learnt from lockdown that will support placements and that should absolutely continue, and they are about the essential nature of the relationship between the young person and the foster carer. If anything, what lockdown has taught us is that we need to strengthen that much more. We need to make sure that the foster carer is the key person around that child, the key person who is supporting them in education.

Often, schools and the wider social care network do not value the role that the foster carer has in encouraging and enabling the education process for those young people. We absolutely think that the foster carer needs to be a central component in the team around the child. We have been saying that for some time but the evidence of lockdown reinforces that message.

Chair: David, do you want to follow up or do you want the other witnesses to come in first? Thanks. Peter?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Peter Sandiford: I think the same would apply to residential work very much taking the lead in building those relationships. I think the concern is about sufficiency of placements, particularly when we are looking at the prospect of another spike, and how we can build that sufficiency. When we are doing comparisons between the public and independent sectors, we need to recognise that there is not a difference quality-wise and cost-wise. We can have debates, but there is lots of evidence of it being highly comparable. It is about how we work together across sectors and I think Covid has given us the opportunity to do that.

A concern, going forward, is how some of the children's homes—and this relates across all sectors—that have been graded as inadequate just prior to Covid are at major risk of having to close at the moment, reducing sufficiency. I am hoping the Committee may take us up on that.

Chair: Kiran, did you want to respond?

Kiran Gill: I suppose it is not really my area of expertise, though I would say that children are moving schools at the moment and we have reports that they are being excluded or having managed moves. We need to have visibility on that because we know that when children do that, they can get lost in the system.

David Simmonds: A quick point, particularly on Kiran's point: if there is some written evidence you might like to submit about that, that would be helpful. That has answered the perspective. Thank you.

Q874 **Chair:** Thank you. Have you finished, David, for the time being? Thank you. Has Apsana managed to come back on the call? I don't think so, so I will ask Apsana's question.

How effective has Ofsted been while its staff have been placed with local authorities and what will be the likely impact of postponing Ofsted inspections until 2021? Kiran?

Kiran Gill: Sorry, Chair, I was looking for a stat. Could you come to me after the next witness? Apologies.

Chair: Okay. Peter?

Peter Sandiford: The impact has been mixed. Ofsted gave very reassuring messages when we were after them about how inspection will take place and the impact of Covid on how we have managed to maintain regulatory standards. The problem is with the homes that have been found recently to be inadequate, just prior to Covid, because often, if they are small providers, that will drive them to shut, potentially, because local authorities, despite very clear messages from Ofsted, are refusing to place in inadequate children's homes, even though they have improved their standards. That is a major concern.

I was talking to a provider yesterday who had lost three placements. They have one child left. They had for many years been outstanding, they



HOUSE OF COMMONS

went through one very traumatic experience, and now they are likely to shut.

Kevin Williams: We have found the advice that Ofsted has given during lockdown to be very helpful, particularly the advice given to foster carers and fostering services.

There will obviously be an impact in stopping the regulatory services, but I do think that what Ofsted is offering at the moment is a lot of support to services about how to manage the pandemic and the changes that are necessary, and it has been very pragmatic around some of the advice and support it is offering. If anything, I hope that what this does is build relationships between providers and Ofsted in order to continue that dialogue, which is not just about a regulatory regime but a regulatory regime that looks to develop continuous improvement.

Kiran Gill: Our schools report that it is helpful for them to have a suspension of inspections. It allows them to cope with the crisis. But I think we are quite worried about what that will look like in the longer term in terms of both having visibility over off-rolling, which Ofsted was doing very well—as I have said previously, we have some anecdotal reports that there are children leaving rolls during lockdown—and also pupil referral unit quality. Small pupil referral units with small staff numbers can change in terms of safety and quality very rapidly.

Q875 **Chair:** Can I ask Kevin and Kiran, both of you? Kevin, you talked about numbers of foster children not having much contact with teachers. Should Ofsted have done more to make sure that particularly looked-after children, vulnerable children, children in foster care, should have had more teaching hours and more contact with teachers?

Kevin Williams: Certainly, I think Ofsted had a role to play in enabling schools to think creatively about the way that they made contact with foster families, both foster children and their foster carers.

Q876 **Chair:** Do you think that has not happened?

Kevin Williams: I don't think it has happened sufficiently. The advice that Ofsted social care gave in terms of its support to fostering services was very good and very helpful in helping people—

Q877 **Chair:** That is a separate thing, though. That is separate from whether or not the kids are getting enough learning or online support or contact with teachers, is it not?

Kevin Williams: It is, but it is also essential, if children are going to learn, that they understand what is going to happen in terms of contact with birth families and those wider issues.

Q878 **Chair:** Thank you. Kiran?

Kiran Gill: In truth, Chair, I am not totally sure what role Ofsted could have played in changing what happened in this lockdown, but I think it is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the case that if we go into another lockdown it would be helpful to have best practice published about how schools have effectively interacted, with what regularity, with families—

Q879 Chair: Do you not think Ofsted could have worked with AP settings, for example, the ones that were not open, and just given them much more guidance, not in terms of heavy inspections—no one has argued for that—but much more support so that you know that these children, all of them, would get the best possible education they could during this time?

Kiran Gill: It is definitely the case that we would like to see Ofsted focusing even more on pupil referral units and AP, particularly independent APs.

Q880 Chair: Should they have done more? You are being very diplomatic.

Kiran Gill: I am.

Chair: Give us a proper answer—don't try to be a diplomat. That is why we have you here before the Committee.

Kiran Gill: Thanks, Chair. I would say Ofsted can do more next time. I would not condemn Ofsted for not having done more this time.

Chair: Okay. That is a wonderful answer. Thank you very much. Can I go now to Ian again, please?

Q881 Ian Mearns: I am wondering if this is a compare and contrast with the last question. How helpful has the Government's scientific and public health guidance and support for children's homes been, for example, on social distancing, access to PPE, and test and trace requirements? Have care homes' costs increased as a result of Covid-19? This is really for you, Peter, I think.

Peter Sandiford: I will probably not be quite as diplomatic as Kiran. That is in advance.

I think there has not been consistent, cohesive advice. When I have gone to the Department for Education to raise it, I have had the impression that the Department has not managed to influence Public Health England in terms of getting clarity.

A learning point from Covid for the future is how we can have a real champion for children, and particularly children in care, leading across Departments. The health element of it, be it mental health as well as education, is so important and it is about how we bind that off together. That has been what has been missing.

We have had very good working across the sector and children's homes, and their staff have worked tremendously together to meet needs—to the point where staff have been locked down with their children for up to a month without going off duty. That is starting, I think, to have the potential to impact on the health of staff. I am hoping the second spike does not come too quickly because we need to build that resilience and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that support we are giving to staff who have struggled over the last four months.

I am not sure if I have answered your question fully. I may have missed a bit there.

Q882 Ian Mearns: I am the chair of governors of a primary school, and my head teacher has been inundated with advice and guidance coming from the DfE. I wonder if it has been a bit like that with you. She got up to about 540 pages of advice and guidance on how to deal with this from the DfE and then she gave up counting after that.

Peter Sandiford: Very similar. The most worrying bit, though, was that you should all wear masks, you should all wear gowns, in your day to day care of children, which was very much the initial guidance that came, that we needed to be doing it the same as in homes for adults, for the elderly; it was when that needed to be challenged.

We did not at any point until the last two weeks get anything clear about what should be expected in a children's home, even before you got Covid, let alone if you did. Then the track and trace guidance, the way that guidance came out, immediately raised anxiety that a children's home would have to shut if one member of staff ended up with the virus and having a positive test because of their contact. Again, that would have immediately addressed sufficiency.

Chair: We have a lot to get through. I hope you understand. Ian, do you want to follow up?

Ian Mearns: No, that is fine, thank you very much.

Q883 Kim Johnson: My questions are aimed to Peter and Kevin. I want to know how well you think Government and local authorities have been in supporting social care workers and foster carers during this time, particularly given that foster carers were not identified as key workers. My supplementary question is around the fact that the numbers of children requiring care will have increased during the crisis, but the numbers of foster carers has decreased. Would you agree with what Barnardo's has said, that we are in a state of emergency?

Peter Sandiford: From a residential point of view, I don't think we have had clarity from local authorities or Government. I wrote very early on saying it would be very helpful to have residential workers recognised in the Prime Minister's statements in the afternoons. I don't think that has happened at all. It was recognised eventually by the Secretary of State, who passed a comment but did not champion it.

What we have is a major issue, I think, in developing a workforce and competence in the workforce. I think the same would apply to fostering, from what I hear from discussions with NAFPP about how their recognition came through. I think it is about how we can do something about that moving forward for the future.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kevin Williams: There has been a variable response across the country. Some local authorities and fostering services acted extremely well and have been very supportive of foster carers. We see others where there that has not been so.

As for the Government response, I wrote to Minister Ford asking for financial support for foster carers. We know that at the time of lockdown there were a number of foster carers who found themselves in financial hardship, particularly those who were undertaking respite care, those who had had a placement recently end and were not able to take new placements, and also those who were self-isolating.

The answer from Minister Ford was that the Government had given £3.2 billion to local authorities and it was for local authorities to spend that money. What we saw in Northern Ireland was an immediate response where foster carers were given an additional allowance at the beginning of lockdown and a further allowance midway through lockdown. We think that the Government responded very poorly in England.

In terms of recognising foster carers, we don't think that there has been much public statement about the support that foster carers have offered. When Minister Ford did write to foster carers to thank them for the work they were doing, it was at my request as part of The Fostering Network's Foster Care Fortnight campaign.

Q884 **Kim Johnson:** Would you agree that we are facing a state of emergency in terms of the reduced numbers of foster carers, given that there is the potential for higher numbers of children to be looked after?

Kevin Williams: It is essential that we focus on retaining the existing workforce. If young people who are traumatised are going to come into the care system post September, if there is a spike, then they need to be with experienced foster carers. What we absolutely also need to do is make sure that where there is recruitment of foster carers, that recruitment is as thorough as possible in order to make sure that children who enter the looked-after system are safeguarded.

I don't know that I would go as far as Barnardo's and say that there is an emergency. I think there is potential for an emerging crisis if we do not look after the existing workforce. That workforce includes foster carers.

Peter Sandiford: I echo that very much in terms of the future if we do not look after the workforce together, yes.

Chair: Before I bring in David, can I bring Caroline Johnson in again, please?

Q885 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** My question is a follow-up to something that Kevin said earlier on. Kevin, you said that 14% of foster carers had had no contact with their schools during the lockdown period, if I heard you correctly. There are a lot of vulnerable children missing out on education. Foster carers would be seeking educational opportunities for the children



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in their care and teachers are key workers because they need to provide the education. Can you clarify what you understand to be the cause of so many, 14%, children missing out on education over that period?

Kevin Williams: The figure of 14% was what foster carers told us about in a recent survey, that they had had no contact from schools during the period of lockdown. I do not think that means that 14% of children did not receive any education because clearly foster carers are focusing on the education of children. It is the direct contact from a school to the foster carer or the young person that was missing.

What we did see was 32% of foster carers say that they had at least weekly contact. What we saw is a variable picture across the country and within individual local authorities, from school to school, about the level of contact they were having. As I have already stressed, 62% in our survey said they had no contact with the virtual school and we found that particularly disappointing.

Q886 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** The question really was: do you have any understanding about why, given that foster carers are looking to schools for this contact, 14% were not getting any? Do you have any information from your survey as to why what was not being provided by the school, if that is the case?

Kevin Williams: No, I am afraid that I do not. That is a question you will have to ask of schools.

Chair: Peter, briefly please.

Peter Sandiford: What our members tell us is that the schools often have a view that because the child was in a safe home, be it a children's home or a foster home, they were better staying there and did not need a school input. That happened on several occasions that have been reported.

Q887 **David Johnston:** I want to ask three practical, more mechanical, questions, possibly based on some of the best practice you have already seen.

First, thinking about mental health and wellbeing, how exactly do you think children and young people should be prepared for their return to school, specifically thinking about their mental health and the practical things you would like to see done for children to prepare them?

Kevin Williams: I have already mentioned that our belief is that there should be a personal education plan, which is undertaken immediately on the return to school, or prior to the return to school if that is possible, and that should include looking at the impact of Covid on individual children before they return to school, including their wider mental health and wellbeing issues but also planning for that potential second phase.

Kiran Gill: The evidence is pretty clear that relationships are the best protective factor in mental health and that is what we would like to see



prioritised. We would like to see schools giving the same rigour that they give to diagnosing missed learning to diagnosing what has happened for a young person while they have not been in school, what has happened to their mental health and their social relationships with peers, and prioritising rebuilding those relationships.

One of the things that The Difference does for our trainees, our teachers, is provide staff supervision, which is a sort of deliberate practice and essentially a sort of mental health support. Mental health workers get supervision, social workers commonly get a sort of supervision, but teachers, despite the fact they have many more contact hours with vulnerable learners, do not always get that supervision. We think that should be a practice priority for schools, to have those kinds of supervision circles for their staff, because teachers cannot look after pupils' mental health if their own mental health is not strong.

Peter Sandiford: I would totally go with what you are saying, Kiran. Our experience would be the same. It is about how schools and carers can work together. The PEP is the classic way, as Kevin has described. I do not think it should wait until the beginning of term. I think it should be starting before the start of next term, from this week as we are finishing, and not making it a blanket rule that all children should be in school as of 3 September but that we have an individual plan for how different children are integrated back into school. Many will have been out for five months.

Q888 **David Johnston:** My second question, similar theme, thinking about the exclusion and behaviour policies in schools: what practical changes would you ideally like to see made to those policies as children go back so that we do not see the spike that some of you have talked about?

Kiran Gill: We do train senior leaders, head teachers, deputy head teachers and assistant heads, in mainstream as well as pupil referral units, and we develop them to think critically about those behaviour policies. Unfortunately, I do not have a blanket answer that policy X should be rolled out because I think it is important that each school builds a policy that suits its children and its local community. But part of that work is reviewing the behaviour system to understand who is repeatedly getting excluded and particularly to put in more reset opportunities.

We found this in the Timpson review: behaviour policies that escalated sanctions rapidly saw children going from small infringements or challenging behaviour that were quite small and rapidly escalated towards a permanent exclusion. We would urge all schools to review their behaviour policies. Interestingly, the Department for Education advice on this has not referenced the recent EES guidance on the best education base on what is working with young people's behaviour.

I would also flag that we think that there needs to be more research done into what works to raise the attendance of children from vulnerable



families. We know that this is a particular concern for our pupil referral units but also our mainstream schools. We have talked about whether children will return to school. Currently, the Government are supporting parental fines and in some schools they have been part of a strategy to increase attendance, but we are concerned that where quite complex drivers are behind pupils not attending, including underlying health concerns in the family or, potentially, social care challenges, that that blunt instrument might not be enough. We think there urgently needs to be research—from Ofsted would be welcome, but also from others—in what is good practice for vulnerable learners.

Q889 David Johnston: As long as Peter and Kevin do not want to say any more on that, my third question of this type is thinking about those in PRUs and AP in Year 11. What do you think needs to be done, practically, to support their transition to whatever they are going on to?

Chair: In a nutshell.

Kiran Gill: We would like to see schools and PRUs be able to take back any students who do not make the transition and to be funded to do so. Currently, pupil referral units are not commonly funded to provide education to 18, despite the fact that children are legally entitled to it, so those children often struggle to make the transition into a big FE college where they have never met anybody from there before and the pastoral systems are different from in their much smaller pupil referral units. We would like to see those PRUs being able to keep those children, that 20% who fail the transition, so they are not on the streets and they are able to get another shot at their English and maths passport qualifications.

Chair: Apsana, I asked your question earlier, because of the technical issues. Do you have a further question you would like to ask?

Q890 Apsana Begum: What role do you think local authorities should play in that? We will be hearing from some of them later on today, but what would be your message for them?

Chair: If you can give us a couple of sentences each. Peter?

Peter Sandiford: Work in partnership with the sector where there is genuine relationship building when looking at commissioning and how we can work together to meet need. There is evidence of that coming through Covid in one or two areas.

Kiran Gill: Sorry, the adrenaline has hit my brain. What local authorities should do? Yes, of course, work collaboratively with their schools.

Kevin Williams: Absolutely, yes, collaboration with foster carers is right and proper. I also think local authorities can fund foster carers to make sure there is a better retention of the workforce. I am worried that what this pandemic has led to is a risk that we will see people leaving the foster care workforce, and it is essential that we retain expertise and knowledge within the sector.



Chair: Kim, you have a follow-up question.

Q891 **Kim Johnson:** A very quick question to Kiran regarding exclusions. As we know, there are disproportionate and higher numbers of young black boys excluded from schools. Do you think that is due to unconscious bias and what should schools and teachers do about it, to prevent that from happening, because it affects their mental health?

Kiran Gill: A really important question. I should tell the Committee that the new exclusions data is available next week and we expect there to be some new analysis, particularly of disproportion by ethnicity.

It is important to recognise that there are intersecting factors at play. We are very clear that trauma is one of the key causes of exclusion, that poverty is also a contributing factor, and that these factors can disproportionately affect students from certain ethnic backgrounds.

I also think that having a more representative school workforce is vital to improving the quality of education we give all children and particularly making sure that unconscious biases do not sneak into any aspects of our policy.

Just to give the Committee some statistics, 33% of the pupil population is from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background: 33%. But of senior leadership teams—assistant, deputy and head teachers—the figure is only 5%. Of assistant heads and deputies, only 1% are black. The Difference is committed to making sure that when we are recruiting fantastic leaders who we want to become assistant heads, deputy heads and heads, we are making sure that diversity is a priority. We are proud that 40% of our cohort are black, Asian or minority ethnic, and 25% are black.

Chair: Ian Mearns, you had a quick follow up.

Q892 **Ian Mearns:** While what we have talked about is preventing a spike in exclusions, do you also have a major concern that in the pupil referral units we are not already in a situation where demand is massively outstripping supply?

Kiran Gill: Absolutely, we are in that situation. We are also in the case that pupil referral units are not adequately funded. We do not have a fair funding formula for those students. We know that in some local authorities outstanding provision is having to close because local authorities need to reorganise the contracts they have for excluded children's education and do not feel they can afford the provision they have. We are already at crisis point in pupil referral unit funding and we need to focus on it.

Q893 **Chair:** Can I check a couple of things? First, Kevin, can you reiterate the 62% figure you gave earlier?

Kevin Williams: In relation to what?

Chair: This was in relation to contact with schools and teachers and so



HOUSE OF COMMONS

on.

Kevin Williams: It was 86% that had had some contact during the lockdown period, 32% had had weekly contact, and 14% had had no contact with the school at all.

Q894 **Chair:** Didn't you use a 62% figure?

Kevin Williams: The 62% was the lack of contact from virtual schools.

Q895 **Chair:** From virtual schools, I see.

Kiran—and please do not be diplomatic this time—what I want to briefly hear from you is what I still have not got from you: the general picture of what has happened for the children who go to AP and PRU schools, and what should have happened. What should Government and Ofsted have been doing? What has been the general picture? Just say it how it is, please. It is unlike you to be a shrinking violet.

Kiran Gill: You are right, Chair. How it has been is that some have had a fantastic practice, been incredibly proactive—daily phone calls, escalation to visits to students' homes, brilliant enrichment packages to maintain the mental health of families—

Chair: I am talking about the general picture. Give me the general picture.

Kiran Gill: This is it. That is not the universal picture. What should have been done, fair enough, Chair, is some urgent research into what the best schools were doing so that guidelines could be put out on what—

Q896 **Chair:** For the majority; what I am trying to find out is whether the majority of children going to those schools, or who need to go to those schools, who have been excluded, have been looked after during the lockdown.

Kiran Gill: It is incredibly variable. We don't have the data. We know that attendance is low but we don't have the data on what is happening, which is why the research is needed, and it needs to be implementable. It needs to give us case studies of what great can look like.

Q897 **Chair:** We know that AP settings that could have opened did not open. Is that not correct?

Kiran Gill: Alternative provision settings were hit by Covid-19 among their staff. They have a smaller staff than other schools so if they do have sickness, which lots of them did, they can struggle to open safely and this was the case for lots that we work with or know about. It is a challenge.

Q898 **Chair:** Just to be clear, if this happens again, what should happen? I have asked the question already but again I did not feel I got an answer. What should happen properly to make sure, as far as humanly possible, that these very vulnerable children get the best possible education and care?



Kiran Gill: We need to gather and publish what the best schools have done to keep those students safe so that other schools can replicate it. We need to be aware, through data collection, both qualitative and quantitative, what the pattern has looked like nationally. At the moment, we just do not have that data and we do not know.

Q899 **Chair:** But presumably your charity, given all the work you do, is analysing this, are you?

Kiran Gill: We are looking at the partner schools that we work with, the 22 schools.

Q900 **Chair:** If you could help us with any further evidence on that, it would be great. I don't know if any of you want to add a final word, Kevin, or Peter?

Peter Sandiford: A final word from me would be please do not rush back to saying everything has to be done face to face. There have been benefits from virtual meetings, virtual support, virtual family contact, virtual social work contact, for our children and it is not about rushing back to saying everything has to be face to face.

Kevin Williams: The best way to ensure good education outcomes is to make sure that we have good, stable placements. Therefore, for me, the essential is to make sure that the current foster care workforce is supported as best as it can be, including financially, in order to make sure that we have placement stability and that that placement stability is able to follow through with those foster carers supporting their young people in schools and having much greater involvement of virtual schools in making sure that those foster carers and young people continue to be supported.

Chair: Thank you very much for some sustained questioning, and we really appreciate all the work that you do. It is hugely respected by all of us and we wish you well. We will have a couple of minutes and the next session will start at 10.52 am.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: John Coughlan, Yvette Stanley and Ian Thomas

Q901 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone. This is our second session this morning on children's services during the lockdown. For the benefit of the tape, could I kindly ask you to introduce yourselves and your titles, starting with Ian, please?

Ian Thomas: Good morning, Chair. My name is Ian Thomas. I am the Chief Executive of the Royal Borough of Kingston.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

John Coughlan: Good morning. I am John Coughlan. I am the Chief Executive of Hampshire County Council.

Yvette Stanley: Good morning. I am Yvette Stanley and I am the National Director for Social Care at Ofsted.

Q902 **Chair:** Thank you. In respect of school attendance, were you surprised that so few vulnerable children have been in school?

Yvette Stanley: I think the Government message, the public health message, was very clear about stay home and stay safe, and families with complex needs heard that message as much as everyone else. You have heard from other colleagues who represent foster carers, but I think among kinship carers there has been a number of multi-generational families and some shielding. Is it a surprise? We have been worried by it and we have all worked very hard together, local authorities and schools, to get the numbers of vulnerable children up. The reasons why people did not go to school are very complicated and multi-layered.

Q903 **Chair:** We are talking about over 80%. The last figures I saw were that 85% have not been going to school. That is a huge number. What have you been doing about it in terms of Ofsted specifically?

Yvette Stanley: Specifically, as you well know, Chair, we took a decision early in the process to redeploy as many staff as we could out to local authorities. We have had over 200 out there for a period, and much of what they have been doing is that very careful work tracking and supporting the local authority and encouraging the parents of vulnerable children to send their children to school. It is a complicated issue, children with SEND and so on, where parents have huge worries.

Q904 **Chair:** Okay, but we are talking about, as I say, over 80% of children, so if you have been telling all these local authorities, it cannot have worked particularly well, given that we know that over 80% have not gone to school during this time, even though the schools are open for them.

Yvette Stanley: I think Ian and John would want to come in and say what activities they have been doing at a local level. Nationally, we have spoken out about the importance of it. We have worked with local authorities and deployed our staff to do some of that careful work. That public health message was very strong.

Q905 **Chair:** Yes, but the public health message was also that vulnerable children could go to school, and over 80% have not. What I am trying to understand is if this happens again, what more could Ofsted do to try to get a higher number going to school?

Yvette Stanley: From what the other colleagues have said previously, and I am sure John and Ian would agree, it is the partnership of the national and local messages and everybody working together to ensure that parents and foster carers and kinship carers feel that it is safe for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

their children to go to school and they are going to be supported in a safe return to school.

Q906 **Chair:** To clarify, how many Ofsted staff were specifically redeployed to the local authorities to assist with this?

Yvette Stanley: We have had about 205 colleagues out in local authorities doing a range of things but many of them doing this work with vulnerable children and the tracking and tracing and encouragement.

Q907 **Chair:** You have 1,400 staff overall, is that right?

Yvette Stanley: I believe so.

Q908 **Chair:** Could I ask Ian or John to comment? Ian, would you like to go first?

Ian Thomas: Yes. I want to support what Yvette said. I do not think it was straightforward. The message coming out very clearly, as we all know, was stay at home and save lives, and we know about the disproportionate impact that Covid has had on BAME communities and, of course, older people. It is a killer. Across the vulnerable cohort of children, many of them on free school meals or those with SEND, it was a risk to the parents and carers and families within those environments, foster carers as well, so it has been a really tricky situation. That said—

Q909 **Chair:** I get what you are saying—sorry to interrupt and it is very politely because I know you have all done enormous work to try to help during the coronavirus—but we are not talking about 50% here: we are talking about 85% roughly of vulnerable children not going to school. That is a huge number. That is basically all of them bar 15%-odd. Something has gone wrong.

Ian Thomas: With respect, Chair, it is something that we are concerned about, have been concerned about, but we do not know what “good” looks like in this context. We have never been in this situation before, so what does good look like?

Certainly, we would want to evaluate what has happened to ensure that if there was to be another wave or another lockdown that we would work hard to improve those figures, but what we are getting back from our school leaders is that they have been working hard to maintain contact with parents and carers to ensure that where remote learning tools and resources are available we have made those available, too. I would not say that the—

Q910 **Chair:** We know that 2.4 million children have not been doing any learning, according to University College London. That is a huge amount, one-fifth of children. That is a massive amount; something has gone wrong. If they are not going to school and millions are not learning something surely has gone wrong. John, can I take your view on it, please? I will come back to you, Ian.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

John Coughlan: Good morning, Chair. I am inclined to agree with you that something has gone wrong. The 15% figure in fairness masks quite a range. I would say that Hampshire has been at the top end of that range, so we have had more vulnerable children than most, both numerically and proportionately, in school. We also know that we have risk-assessed every vulnerable child that is not in school; those are the vulnerable children that we know, of course. There is another cohort that we do not know.

I am not ducking the question when I say I think one of the reasons why we have done better than the national average is that we work determinedly in this authority on what we call a whole system for children, and the fracture that we have seen in recent years between the education system and the local authority children's services responsibilities we have avoided happening here. We have a very strong set of networks and relationships with our school community, so we have been able to work very closely with the key schools and with key children to try to get them in there.

I also would share the comments from my colleagues. I do not think we should necessarily be surprised, because of the unprecedented nature of the situation. We are talking, as well as in a fluffy notion of vulnerability, if you do not mind me putting it like this, that a number of these children were very difficult to get into school at the best of times.

Q911 **Chair:** I accept that; that is an important point. Can I go back to Ofsted, please, Yvette? Is it okay to call you by your first name? Are you happy with that?

Yvette Stanley: Of course, yes.

Q912 **Chair:** There were 2.4 million children not learning during the lockdown. You said it is very difficult for vulnerable children to get back to school. Is that something that Ofsted bears any responsibility for or was there nothing you could do about it?

Yvette Stanley: Apologies, Chair, I was just taking in your question. I think some of these matters are a matter of policy. Obviously, Ofsted has tried to exude a leadership role in this time of crisis, and we have done that by stepping back from our inspection regime and relocating our staff out across the system.

We also want to be as helpful as we can in resetting the system and learning from the last few months and enabling schools and social care providers to utilise the learning from the past months to make sure that we close the gap as soon as possible and we get as many children back to school as quickly as possible. That is where we are concentrating our effort in our assurance visits for the autumn term.

Q913 **Chair:** Is a leadership role really allowing 2.4 million children to have had barely any work at home and 85% of vulnerable children not in school? Is that what you call a leadership role?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Yvette Stanley: I think our leadership role is to support the policy and to support the message at the time, and we worked really hard to make sure that local authorities were getting vulnerable children back and to support schools in making sure that they were open. There was little more that we could do, given our very specific role. Like others, we are prepared to learn from this and we are prepared to build on the learning from the last few months.

Q914 **Chair:** What would you do differently if this happens again, God forbid?

Yvette Stanley: I think I would go back to John's point about a system that works together to make sure that everything is knitted together to make things happen. I think, and this is a personal view, that we would have been clearer about the expectations of schools, but absolutely understanding the very pragmatic difficulties.

A colleague was just talking about the AP and the PRUs being closed because of staffing issues. There is a balance with the ambition and the expectations and the pragmatic difficulties. I think we have been working through those as partners in a very challenging time over a number of months now. The learning from that absolutely has to inform what happens in the autumn.

Q915 **Chair:** Ian, I beg your pardon, you wanted to come back. I am sorry I cut you off.

Ian Thomas: No, it is fine, Chair. I would absolutely endorse what John and Yvette have said. We know that in London regionally it has been a real concern. The figures when we have been analysing them would seem to indicate we have a higher number of BAME kids in the London region and when we continue to get that feedback it is about the risk that was posed to carers going back. That is part of it, but I have to say we are continuing to learn and evaluate practice to ensure that next time there is a better response.

We do know that children returned to school in bubbles as well, so there is a difference when you analyse figures throughout the whole Covid pandemic period. Like John, my authority has had a wraparound support framework in place for children, which has seen the statistics for my authority area among the highest in London. As you say, and as you allude to, there is lots of work to do to understand how we can improve going forward.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to quickly bring in Caroline Johnson before I bring Kim in, if that is okay.

Q916 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** My question is for Yvette in relation to what the Chair asked you. A witness in our last session told us that 14% of children in foster care had received no contact from their school whatsoever during the lockdown period. Does Ofsted consider this acceptable, and since foster carers are seeking this work from the schools and the teachers are key workers in work, what has gone wrong and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

what is Ofsted doing about it?

Yvette Stanley: As I just said, our role in the autumn will be to look at what goes forward and the learning from the last few months. Absolutely not. I would have expected much more contact with parents. I do know that many schools have been very active in their engagement with parents, including visiting them at home, delivering worksheets.

We visited a number of schools in the last couple of months, at their request, because as you know we were stepped back from our usual functions. We visited the schools and we saw the whole continuum, from weekly contact, phone calls twice a week, worksheets delivered, online learning, but absolutely that has not been the case universally across the system. It does cause some learning about what were the common expectations and what were the real practical difficulties for some schools, whether it was the availability of online learning or some schools having had more than average staff absences, but what can we learn from the best and make sure that everybody, just in case there are local lockdowns, just in case there is disruption in the autumn, is up there with the best possible and regular contact.

Q917 **Chair:** Sorry, Caroline, I will let you come back, but relevant to what you said, the previous witness said that 62% of carers have had no contact virtually from their school head teacher during the lockdown. That was Ofsted's job, was it not, to sort out and supervise? What has gone wrong there?

Yvette Stanley: With the greatest respect, Chair, I do not think it is Ofsted's role to have overseen the expectations on schools in the pandemic. It would have been very much the expectation that that policy steer was set by national Government. In a very difficult situation it was not clear what the expectations of schools were. I think we have seen some schools achieving this really well and some where it has not. Absolutely I would not want that figure to be repeated in any future event.

Q918 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** You say that expectations were not set, but teachers were made key workers, provision for their childcare should it be needed for them to attend work was given, full pay was also provided. I think it was quite clear what was expected in terms of that teachers would be working full-time during the pandemic.

As you say, many have done exemplary work. I know that my children had exemplary work from their teachers, but if 14% of the most vulnerable children in foster care have had no contact from their school at all, as we were told by a previous witness, then some have not been doing what is not a case of achieving some particularly high standard. People cannot be off sick for a whole six months, and if they are then their head teacher should be putting in other provision.

What has gone wrong? Do you think Ofsted stepping back and providing no indication of standards and no supervision and the statement that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

they would not be looking back at what had gone on during this period at the beginning of lockdown has contributed to these children not getting any education provided by their schools at all? It makes me very angry to think that 14% of children—these most vulnerable, most needy children—have had nothing received from their school by their foster carers who have sought it at all.

Yvette Stanley: I absolutely understand your frustration and anger with this, and I absolutely would share that expectation that all professionals across schools, across social care, were all doing their level best to make sure that there was maximum contact with families, not least because we are hugely worried about the risk of hidden harm behind closed doors. Absolutely I would endorse that expectation that everybody should have had as many colleagues in school, as many colleagues doing that outreach work, setting work, making an appropriate offer for the children both in school and at home. We absolutely all share that common ambition.

Q919 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Sorry to interrupt you. We would all agree with that, but what responsibility does Ofsted have to make sure that schools are delivering at least some contact? To have no contact at all is nothing, isn't it? What responsibility does Ofsted have?

Yvette Stanley: It will be our role through the autumn, through the assurance visits, to both garner good practice and point out where things went wrong and to make sure—

Q920 **Chair:** Why did you not do that from the beginning, to work with the schools, help them? Not to point fingers—I understand the inspections were not going to happen—but to make sure that you did not have a situation as Caroline has just described, or that 2.4 million children are not doing any work at all.

Yvette Stanley: We were stepped back from our routine inspection function. I am here representing the social care part of Ofsted, and we have continued through the lockdown process to undertake our regulatory work and to work with local authorities around the vulnerable children's piece and to make sure that we are registering children's homes.

We were not in the space where we were working so actively with schools in terms of the standards, in terms of delivery. We moved into what was the REACT system, so the regional education and children's teams, with the DfE to work at the front end, to make sure the maximum number of children were—we changed our role.

Q921 **Chair:** Sorry, I know John Coughlan has had his hand up a long time.

John Coughlan: I wanted to come in on this point, if I may, Chair. Far be it for me to defend Ofsted to the hilt, because I do think there is a fundamental issue here from Ofsted's perspective on the education side of Ofsted about how well it regulates and inspects schools generally about



HOUSE OF COMMONS

looking after vulnerable children. Therefore, I do not think we should be that surprised if that side of a school's role starts to crumble at a time of deep crisis.

The one point I really want to make on the foster care issue, to be honest with you, is that is the role of local authority social services as well. Each one of those children in foster care will have a care plan and they will have a social worker. That job is to be a painful parent at times like this. It is easy to see why those children could fall off the radar of a school, but it is less easy to see why local authorities are not then stepping into the space and making the school make contact. I just want to be clear about that.

Chair: I will bring you back in a bit, Caroline. Tom Hunt.

Q922 **Tom Hunt:** I am going to pick up on some of the points that have been made already by some colleagues. I have met with a number of schools in my constituency and the teachers there have gone above and beyond when it comes to continuing to provide first-class education through online support. Many of them want to see Ofsted play a role when it comes to inspecting and, if necessary, casting judgment on which schools have risen to the challenge and provided first-class support and not let down the children they are responsible for, and those who have not.

I appreciate that for many schools there have been challenges getting access to materials and so on, but I do think Ofsted needs to be prepared to if necessary cast judgment and say perhaps, "You have not risen to the challenge". At any stage is Ofsted going to do that? I know that you are resuming your visits in the autumn, but there does not seem to be much inspection going on there. I understand why inspections have not been able to continue throughout Covid, but at some point surely Ofsted needs to, if necessary, cast judgment on which schools have risen to the challenge and which schools have not.

Chair: Good point. Yvette?

Yvette Stanley: I was going to agree with John's point that it is a community that raises a child, and much of my team's focus within Ofsted has been on the local authority and the support for foster caring organisations.

Going back to Tom Hunt's question, many of these questions are about the commission that we are given in terms of policy from the DfE at a particular point in time. Some of these questions would be helpful if they were here to answer them. We have been and we will make judgments where we are concerned about safeguarding going forward, but the commission that we have been given from the DfE is in the research space, not in the inspection space.

Absolutely, where we have worries about the protection and safeguarding of children we can move into that inspection space. That is what we have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

been commissioned by the Secretary of State to do for the autumn. I absolutely get your frustration with that, but that is the position.

Chair: Thank you. Kim Johnson, thank you for waiting so patiently.

Q923 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. I have two questions aimed at all of the witnesses. The first question: last year Ofsted deemed half of all local authority children's services inadequate or requiring improvement. Covid-19 and 10 years of austerity has put major pressure on these local authorities. Liverpool, for example, have had a 64% reduction in funding. How confident are you that these local authorities can provide support to families and children in need? John first, please.

John Coughlan: Thank you. It is a massive question and I can well understand where it is coming from. The first thing I want to say is that personally I have long been in favour of us reviewing the grading from Ofsted, because I think it is quite a blunt instrument. I say that as an authority that works a lot with authorities that are in inadequate positions, so we support other authorities all the time. I am not ducking the point of your question, but I think there are lots of grades of requiring improvement and I am not sure the fixed grade is particularly helpful.

I absolutely agree with your point about the issue to do with funding and also, I would argue, the status of children's social care in recent years. Most local authorities, to my mind, fund their children's social services at least above, if not well above, whatever the target funding should be based upon Government grants. They do that because they care about their children deeply, but also they know usually the implications of getting it wrong for children's social services. I think most local authorities are very proud of that role and work very hard at it, but it is undoubtedly under tremendous pressure.

More needs to be done around the status of children's social work and around the status and the focus of the agencies that are there to support it. For example, within the Department for Education—and I might even go so far as to say within the name of this Committee, which is an Education Committee but which is covering the full scope of children's services in the way that directors have to—I think there are a number of steps and those are just a couple of illustrative ones. We have to drive that improvement.

Ian Thomas: Thanks, Kim, for the question. The point I would like to make is that an Ofsted grading provides some assurance regarding the practice in an area at a point in time, but as gradings vary, go down as well as up, it would be wrong to judge the efficacy of response in the Covid-19 context by the authority's last Ofsted judgment. Many judged inadequate or required improvement when last inspected will be on a positive trajectory of improvement with practice that some good and outstanding places like mine can even learn from. I imagine, therefore, that during Covid-19 most places will have risen to the challenge,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

coalescing their efforts together with their partners to tackle the biggest public health threat in peacetime history.

I absolutely agree with you regarding austerity and the reduction of funding. We have found ourselves now in a position where we are supporting fewer children and protecting more to a greater cost. It does not make sense. We need to look at this. We need to ensure that we have a range of early help services, using that “village to raise a child” approach, so that we intervene less in the lives of families.

Yvette Stanley: Building on what the last two witnesses said, at the start of Covid it was very much an improving trend, albeit from that very low base that you talked about. We had 18 local authorities that were outstanding and we have reduced the number that was inadequate from 33 to 21.

As I think Ian just said, Covid was a storm that has raged differentially across the country and we are worried about that impact. With the previous witnesses, you were talking about the impact in the autumn of possibly 100,000 referrals that have not come in between May and June and when they hit local authorities and their capacity to deal with them.

The local authorities that will cope best will be those that have manageable caseloads and sufficient social workers to do purposeful work with children and who have the preventative services that wrap around children to enable them to be helped at the lowest level of intervention. We know what good looks like. We know the ingredients of good and Covid will be a disrupter of that in terms of that infrastructure but also have an impact in terms of that volume.

I think the priority for the autumn is making sure that local authorities are prepared for what could be a very difficult time, particularly in October and November. The school referrals tend to peak at that time of year, but if it is the 100,000 delayed referrals then that could be a massive impact on local authorities.

Q924 **Kim Johnson:** My second question, again to all three witnesses: in your experience how effectively have schools been able to hold the role of being an early warning system on safeguarding while the majority of children have been outside of the classroom? We have just spoken about the damning numbers of kids who have not been educated throughout this period, so can we start with Ian, please?

Chair: Can you try to all give concise answers, please?

Ian Thomas: With brevity, then, there is no doubt that during lockdown the ability of schools to be the eyes and ears of the safeguarding system has been diminished. This is also true of the other agencies as well—the other universal services in health and the voluntary sector. People have not been out and about as much. Yes, it has diminished. I would like to say that schools and colleagues across the system have worked hard to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

keep in touch with vulnerable children throughout, even if there have been disappointing figures with school attendance, which we all accept.

John Coughlan: What I think is interesting is that the surge has started earlier than we expected. Most authorities I have spoken to experienced a similar downturn in referrals that we certainly did, but that turned around, around May, and that has continued to surge upwards since. We are currently on routine referrals around about 15% above this time last year and we do not think that is going to come down any time soon. I have spoken to other authorities that are even higher than that at the moment, so somehow or other the referrals are coming back through.

The one other point I would make concisely is that personally I am less worried about the children who we know to be vulnerable at the moment in the current crisis than I am about the ones who we do not know to be vulnerable—who are going well below everybody’s radar while they are at home.

Q925 **Kim Johnson:** I think that is a point that we have been made aware of throughout some of our witness testimonies over the last couple of weeks, about the kids that we do not know about. Finally, Yvette, concisely please.

Yvette Stanley: I echo those points and start with the hidden harm and the children we are not aware of. We know that the national hotlines have experienced surges. We know that the police are taking a lot of police protection orders in situations of domestic violence. I am seeing large numbers of very worrying significant enduring harm to under-ones coming through the hospital system. While we are not sighted on those school-age children as much as we would like, there are still issues out there and we are also really worried about the adolescents, adolescent self-harm, suicide. Again, those we have had a steady flow of referrals and safeguarding—

Q926 **Chair:** Are you compiling any statistics on what you have just set out?

Yvette Stanley: The national panel are from the DfE and we are working very closely with them. They will be available.

Q927 **Chair:** We would be grateful if we could get you or the DfE to send us those statistics. Do you know when they will be available?

Yvette Stanley: The national panel just announced they are going to do a review of babies, just because of the flow of those. I can ask DfE policy colleagues to release them.

Chair: Thank you very much. It would be very helpful. David Simmonds, I think you had a quick question, is that right?

Q928 **David Simmonds:** Yes, very quick. We have our three foremost experts. What do you think of the easements that have been introduced by the DfE to various statutory deadlines during this period?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

John Coughlan: I was hoping this question would not come up in detail because I do not know all of them, as a chief executive. I would make a general comment. They make sense to me. I think they have been helpful. I do not think most of them have been deployed. I worry generally that people are resistant to such easements or such flexibility in the regulatory framework at the moment, as if taking anything away is going to be bad for children. I worry that there is not a sensible conversation about what is a very burdensome regulatory framework, which I do not think equates to safeguarding children necessarily.

Ian Thomas: For most SEND children we have had to use reasonable endeavours to meet their needs, Chair and David. The provisions have been useful, given the risk to staff and those of our partner agencies, carefully balancing the needs of families with the safety of our staff. The reviews have been good. Locally here we have been fortunate to have access to remote services from our health colleagues, where in other areas we know that NHS staff have been deployed to the front-line. I do have three areas in terms of some of the pressing needs: CAMHS waiting lists increasing, mental health support in schools, and particularly mental health support for SEN children will be really helpful and I am hoping that will be in place by September.

With regard to social care easements really quickly, again useful but we have not used them as much. Examples of the ones we have applied include statutory visits and reviews, for example. We have been able to do those remotely and it has been really useful.

Yvette Stanley: We have continued to say that you should use any relaxation with caution, care and in a child-centred way. The work that we were commissioned by the DfE to look at local authorities' use of them showed that on the SEND front it is very much because of the disruption in health, the inability to get the assessments needed. That has also impacted on adoption and fostering medicals in some way. Most local authorities are using them very sparingly, very carefully, and they are using the virtual tool in addition to face to face wherever possible.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring Ian in first, then Jonathan Gullis.

Q929 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much, Chair. I think one of the positive aspects of this whole experience from the perspective of local councils is that Government Departments now know that local councils exist. I am speaking as one who was a member of a local authority for 27 years before I started doing this particular role.

How would you judge the Department, the DfE, in terms of its guidance that has been produced in relation to schools, safeguarding and areas such as PPE? I am looking at Ian and John particularly.

Ian Thomas: I think that the DfE has been helpful in terms of working with local authorities. We have had regular senior policy advisers keeping in touch with us. We have had HMIs that have been deployed to work with the local authority doing some really great work with children at risk



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of being NEET. Indra Morris, the Director General at the DfE, has established a national vulnerable young people's panel. I am privileged to have been a witness to that, where she has really sought to understand what the issues are from experts on the ground.

I think some of the challenges have been the timeliness of the guidance, and I think in some cases maybe a lack of clarity. As I say, we were operating in the eye of the storm. It was, especially in the peak period, very difficult and we have already heard how difficult it was in terms of receiving clarity of information and guidance.

Q930 Ian Mearns: A quick supplementary to that, Ian, in terms of the clarity. As Chief Executive and obviously responsible for multiple departments within the local authority, have you had experience of Government guidance coming from different Departments that was plainly contradictory?

Ian Thomas: Yes, there was lots of guidance being contributed without much time to reflect on the implementation of them and the practicalities of them from different Government Departments. I would say that is a fair challenge.

John Coughlan: My managers tell me that DfE have issued over 200 individual pieces of guidance through the crisis. That strikes me instinctively as too reactive and too fast. That would be their judgment of how supportive it has been. I have huge respect and sympathy for my DfE colleagues because they, like us, are working in unknown circumstances and they have been tremendously supportive in all of my direct contact, but I would refer to my previous answer.

I am not sure of the status of social care within the Department for Education. I am not sure how well respected that service and we are across the whole of the education field, and I would like to think that one of the opportunities that comes from this crisis is some deep rethinking about that level of status. It is not about the individuals; it is about how well we understand nationally what we do locally around a whole system for children.

Q931 Ian Mearns: Has there been anything in particular that has stuck out in terms of the guidance that has been received in relation to schools safeguarding and personal protective equipment?

John Coughlan: Not specifically on that. The one that we point to, because it is a dreadfully difficult nut to crack but speaking as a county authority, home-to-school transport is enormously difficult. We came into this crisis in a crisis of home-to-school transport around the cost and the failure, I would say, of Government to redress some very old and inapplicable legislation and regulation.

The guidance around what to do in September is almost inevitably not going to cover what is going to be a tremendous set of challenges, to work with staggered timetables, staggered year groups, an enormous



HOUSE OF COMMONS

number of children dependent upon transport and a transport sector that is in relative disarray. September is going to be a real problem for getting children to school.

Chair: Ian, because we do not have much time left, do you mind if I move on to David Simmonds, please?

Ian Mearns: By all means—no problem.

Q932 **David Simmonds:** Thanks, Chair. Talking specifically about DSG, Government obviously announced the additional £3.2 billion. I am interested in your view about how useful that is in context, with the pressures that we have around children's services.

A very specific question I would like to ask you about: we know nationally there is significant pressure building up on the DSG for deficits, which will have an impact on the planning for future recovery. I will be very keen to hear your perspective about how that needs to be dealt with. Some schools are saying it should be treated like the NHS and should all be written off in one go, but one way or another it is going to have to be dealt with and local authorities lack the levers to deal with it directly.

What is your view about the impact that is going to have on the recovery from Covid and do you have a view about how that should be resolved?

Ian Thomas: Thanks for the question, David. While the sector has welcomed the additional funding of £3.2 billion, according to the LGA local government is short of around £7.4 billion in terms of the cost of Covid-19. This is due to a combination of additional expenditure, lost income, inability to make savings, et cetera. There is no additional funding for children's services.

Over the last 10 years, due to the reduction in funding, councils have spent less on supporting children and more on protecting them, as I said earlier on. We still have this big problem of rising children in care costs and not enough money to provide early help and earlier intervention.

With regards to DSG deficits, something that is close to my heart given the situation I find myself in locally, I think that there needs to be either more funding to pay for the 65% increase in education, health and care plans or a harder ring-fence between the general fund and DSG, as we see with the housing revenue account or a longer time to pay.

The other thing you could do, David, is for that balance to be held centrally, with central government, rather than local authority balance sheets. I have to say as well there are things that you can do to save some money, but it is not going to anywhere near wipe out that deficit. We can always work to be more efficient and reduce the cost of EHCPs but we do have a massive gap between what is available and the demand for education, health and care plans in particular.

John Coughlan: With regard to the money to support us through the crisis, it is enormously welcome. I know colleagues in MHCLG and DfE



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and elsewhere have fought very hard for it, but it simply is not enough. Again I have to say, speaking as a county, that the distribution of that through districts for the second tranche was bewildering.

At the end of this year, if the crisis carries on in situ, as we expect it to, so not for anything further to go wrong, my county is looking at around about a £100 million gap that is going to do huge damage to our future planning. How we work through that I do not know, but we need much more financial support to cope with the reality of the cost of the crisis, as Ian articulated.

With regard to DSG, again I agree with Ian. We came into the crisis when we were pointing towards a crisis in school funding, because of a range of factors, obviously the fundamental one being about enough money within the system. I would not support an approach to school deficits to match that which happened in the NHS.

I think it would have the impact of punishing the worst behaviour, and I do not mean that disrespectfully to the schools concerned, but also not recognising the good work of schools that have kept their heads above water in very difficult times. I think more thought needs to be given, including some of the suggestions that Ian made, but I would not wipe out the debt.

Chair: David, are you okay?

Q933 **David Simmonds:** Yes, that is really helpful. The follow-up, really, is about the balance. We know children's services is the only area where expenditure at council level has expanded over the last decade. The key question people ask, and it will be a factor in the care review, is the balance between the early intervention stuff and the bit that is spent on the system. Do you have a view you would like to share with us, perhaps followed up by some evidence later on about what the direction of travel should be around that?

Chair: Can all of you be as concise as possible? Yvette, I do not know if you would like to comment on that.

Yvette Stanley: No, my only comment on the finances is back to the good ingredients for social care. You have to have enough social workers and you have to be able to afford the right placements for the children. Local authorities have very little wriggle room and where we see them taking money out of either side of that equation we see them falling into inadequacy. That would be the only point I would make from an Ofsted perspective about the money.

John Coughlan: There is no doubt that all authorities have had to retreat into the heavier end and the more expensive end of our work, as Ian alluded to earlier. That is unhelpful. I would be cautious about a return to what I would call "blanket early intervention" because we do not think it worked very well.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

While there was lots of money invested in blanket early intervention, which was not well targeted, our children in care population was continuing to rise exponentially. I think there needs to be more thought given to what the targeting of early intervention should be, as well as undoubtedly some additional investment for early intervention.

Ian Thomas: Building on that point, early help is a broad church of activities. Some of it I would say is nice to do. I think we need to do more work on educare, the work that really prevents children from being brought into the care system, with an evidence base to it. We hear lots of the work around family group conferencing, MST, multi-systemic therapy approach, and we should do more work on those evidence-based approaches that are proven to be effective at keeping children with families as opposed to being brought into the public care system.

Chair: Thank you. Jonathan Gullis had a quick question.

Q934 **Jonathan Gullis:** Thank you very much, Chair. John, I thank you for raising the issue of transport, which is what I wanted to raise, which is a major issue, especially with SEND students going into September. We know the Department for Transport has given £10 million for local authorities to explore how they are going to do this, but I would like to know what type of funding you think is going to be required for extra buses or taxi services for those looked-after children but also those SEND students to be able to get to their schools.

Chair: Can we have a one-sentence answer, please, Ian and John?

Ian Thomas: I think it is about listening to parents, carers and people on the ground about what is required, because going back in September there will be staggered arrangements, there will be lots of anxiety to manage with children going back. Transitioning, as we have heard from other witnesses, is going to be difficult for a large proportion of these children come September.

John Coughlan: I cannot give you a figure. It would be a lot of money to crack it, but to be honest I am reliably advised that there are not the buses physically to pay for to get the children in the places in the right way. I think we have to recontract with parents who may be well placed to do more of their own transporting, and try to find ways in which we can support them financially to do so, otherwise we are going to have chaos.

Chair: Ian, I have to bring a lot of other colleagues in who have not had questions. Is your question a necessity, or can you wait?

Q935 **Ian Mearns:** It is about managing the finance, Chair, which I think is really important. My own local authority has £69 million additional expenditure and/or reduction in income, and we have had £15 million from the £3.2 billion so far. One suggestion that I have heard is that local authorities are going to have to soak this up, basically, and a way of doing that might be to capitalise that difference—in other words, borrow



HOUSE OF COMMONS

it and then repay it over a long time. Have you heard anything on that as chief executives?

Chair: Can we have one sentence answers, again, please?

John Coughlan: I have not heard anything like that and I would not support it. We need cash.

Ian Thomas: I support John.

Q936 **David Johnston:** A couple of quick questions. You may feel you have said all you wanted to about them, but children in care, what exactly has been the impact of lockdown, and children coming into care, and could you specifically comment on the effectiveness of video interviews during this period and whether they have worked or not?

Yvette Stanley: We know that slightly fewer children have come into the care system, although as I said earlier the police are using their protection orders and local authorities have been taken into proceedings because of issues arising pre and post-Covid, but fewer children have been leaving care and stepping down to leaving care services, again for obvious reasons in the pandemic.

We do expect to see an increase coming forward. Some older children have said they have thrived with the extra conversations with their social worker and personal advisers. Some young people have really felt the social isolation. They may have lost jobs, they may be on furlough, so I think there is a different answer to that question for every child.

I know foster carers have responded well to lots of conversations with their supporting foster carer and where it has worked well, the same for kinship. What we have to go back to, the start of this conversation, is the variability and what are the common expectations, albeit as all three witnesses have said this was a pandemic, this is the first time any of us have been through this in our long careers, and we have had to learn and be nimble and be humble about our mistakes along the way.

Chair: Thank you. Would anyone else like to comment on that at all?

John Coughlan: On the virtual working, if I may, sorry, Ian, our social workers really like it in parts. They worry a little bit about not seeing things physically, so we are kind of 50:50. It is one of the easements that need to be looked at carefully before it is wiped away, because I think there is a real potential benefit there. Teenagers sometimes like talking to a screen more than to a person.

Chair: Thank you. David, do you want to come back? Sorry, Ian, are you happy to come back on the second question of David?

Q937 **David Simmonds:** My second question, which again we have touched on and the Committee has heard this throughout the weeks, is about the increase we are expecting in referrals for domestic abuse and other child protection issues. What exactly do you expect to happen, in a nutshell,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

when schools return in September concerning those issues?

Ian Thomas: As mentioned previously, demand is already starting to increase as lockdown eases. The emerging picture is one of increased complexity, as previously explained by other witnesses, and this is set to continue for some time.

Managing demand for social care necessitates a combination of effective early help, as I have said before, in care interventions and regular checks to ensure that the right professionals are involved with the right children at the right time. I worry personally about mental health and family resilience as we head into a deep recession. It will be a long time, I think, before we see the full impact of Covid-19.

John Coughlan: If I may add one point to Ian's, every time we see a spike in activity in social care, whether it is post-Baby P or any other significant event, the spike never comes back down to its previous level. We are anticipating our normal to be about 15% above where it was before the crisis hit.

Q938 **Apsana Begum:** My questions are about schools and behavioural issues and exclusions. First, what do you think needs to change in respect of exclusion policies when schools return in September, given that in this scenario some children have thrived and some are at risk of becoming non-returners, either because they have thrived at being at home or because they are anxious about returning? We have lots of young people that might be transitioning into a new setting in this scenario as well, so it would be good to hear your thoughts on that.

Ian Thomas: I am conscious of time, Chair. It is a really long answer to this but I have worked with many head teachers in the past and not one of them relishes the prospect of excluding children. The question is about how we put the holistic needs of children at the centre of plans for September when we expect children to return to school. Many children will be finding things really difficult and that means the priority must be about integration and recognising that some children and young people will face particular challenges going forward.

John Coughlan: If I may add to that briefly as well, the other dimension to the question, which was not touched upon, is that schools as well have had to go through huge changes and transformations to get this far and they will have to do so again in September. That will add to the complexity and again I would say the whole system approach, child-focused with people working together to avoid exclusions.

If I may return to the earlier interviews as well, Chair, there was a reference to increasing provision or alternative provision in PRUs. That may well be needed, but what I know about PRUs, every time you open it you fill it. It is like a motorway, and you need to fill another one. I think we need to focus much more heavily, including through Ofsted, on the inclusion functions of schools in the mainstream.



Yvette Stanley: I endorse that, how schools and their partners work together to wrap around services to keep children safe and supported and return to school. The other area that I do have to worry about is an increase in elective home education and some parents doing that really well but some young people who would really be better served in school and in that wider community not returning to school.

Chair: Apsana, I know you have a final question.

Q939 **Apsana Begum:** What about those out of school being reached by support services such as those dealing with mental health? What are your thoughts on that?

Yvette Stanley: I think it will be absolutely important. You had a witness earlier who talked about the work she was doing with schools about trauma-informed approaches. I think schools need to be supported in working in the health and well-being arena, but absolutely, going back to what Ian and John have said, in terms of the village raising the child there will be some children who need targeted, specialist and preventative services beyond the reach and capability of schools. Absolutely we need to make sure that that continuum is there to enable children to thrive.

Q940 **Apsana Begum:** On something slightly different, we had a recent report from the Metropolitan Police. There was a report also of the National Youth Agency in June about county lines gangs, and the Metropolitan Police has announced the extension of its crackdown on county lines gangs as well.

In lockdown, how have local authorities been working jointly with other services and local organisations to prevent young people getting involved in county lines gangs, given the fact that with lots of young people online with learning and so forth the dangers of online harms as well?

Chair: As an addition to Apsana's question, are there going to be these new frontiers of vulnerable children who are not on the existing criteria but, as has just been pointed out, exposed to county lines gangs or online harms or whatever it may be that we are now going to need to focus on as we come out of the lockdown?

Yvette Stanley: I was going to say I have seen some local authorities doing some really good preventative work through their youth services. I think we need to appreciate the breadth and diversity of the provision that local authorities make.

I think the police are very worried about the nimbleness of the county lines organisers. We have seen drug dealing now going on outside of supermarkets, because they can hide it in the queues, and so on. We have seen young people dressed up in protective uniforms, so it looks like they are out there doing purposeful prevention work when they are dealing on a county line. We are really worried about how these have developed and it will need firm partnership between schools, the local



HOUSE OF COMMONS

authority, police and wider partners to respond to the changing evolution of the processes.

Ian Thomas: Community safety partnerships and children's safeguarding partnerships—I chair the one here—have been active throughout the pandemic. It is through these partnerships, sharing intelligence and effective multi-agency working, that contextual safeguarding challenges—because that is what we are talking about, such as county lines and criminal and sexual exploitation—have continued to be effectively tackled.

There will be new needs emerging, especially as we head into a deep recession, and there will be an uptake in drugs and drug trafficking and so on, so we will be seeing demand increase, I think. We know much more about our rough sleeping community and that will also add to the demand that we are going to see in the system and it will rise over the next few months and years, I am sure.

John Coughlan: Conversely, I have heard anecdotal evidence from the police that said during lockdown it was easier to identify some of the offenders than it was before. Undoubtedly, some of the points that have been made apply.

My greatest concern is that we have perceived children during this pandemic as the most immune from the harm of the pandemic directly in terms of the disease, but I fear the long-term impact upon children because of some of the issues that we have been talking about may be very profound and we need to gear around that.

Q941 **Chair:** Do you think there needs to be a new criteria for vulnerable children?

John Coughlan: I am not so sure about a new criteria. I think we need to think very deeply and collectively locally and nationally about what we do about that group of children I have referred to before, the ones who were not at risk of harm before but may be now and have gone below the radar.

Chair: I really appreciate your efforts today in a very tight session. I wish you well and thank you for all that you do in your respective councils and, of course, with Ofsted, and I hope you all have a very good summer as well. Thank you very much for your time and very good luck to you and all your organisations. The Committee has now ended. Thank you.