

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Accountability hearings](#), HC 341

Wednesday 14 March 2018

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Lucy Allan; Michelle Donelan; Emma Hardy; Trudy Harrison; Ian Mearns; Lucy Powell; Thelma Walker; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 636-718

Witnesses

I: Nadhim Zahawi MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families, and Katy Willison, Director of Children's Social Care, Practice and Workforce, Department for Education

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Nadhim Zahawi MP and Katy Willison.

Q636 **Chair:** Good morning, Minister. Good morning, Ms Willison. For the benefit of those watching and for the tape, could you kindly introduce yourself and your position?

Nadhim Zahawi: Good morning, Chairman, and thank you. My name is Nadhim Zahawi. I am the Minister for Children and Families.

Katy Willison: I am Katy Willison, and I am the Director at the Department for Education of Children's Social Care, Workforce and Practice.

Chair: Thank you. Just to warn you that the acoustics are not fantastic, so if you could speak loudly.

Katy Willison: I will try to speak up.

Q637 **Lucy Powell:** Good morning, Minister. I have a couple of questions on the early years workforce. The first is slightly more general. There was a commitment made by the Government last year to produce an early years workforce strategy, particularly looking at how we can get quality in some of the disadvantaged areas. I understand that was originally proposed to be published this month but it has now been kicked into the long grass. Do you want to tell us if that is the case and what you are doing on the early years workforce more generally?

Nadhim Zahawi: It has certainly not been kicked into the long grass. It is a priority for us in the Department and it certainly is a priority for me. If you look at all the evidence—and the Department, as well as the new Minister, likes to follow the evidence—it is that early years is probably the most important intervention we can make on social mobility. I know that is something that both the Chairman and the Committee are really concerned about and focused on, which is why we are making sure that we try to invest in early years, both workforce but also provision linked to schools. If you can deliver a better outcome in the early years, educationally, then you begin to do something about the gap that can, if left, become bigger and bigger as a child progresses. It has certainly not been kicked into the long grass and we are in the process of putting forward that strategy.

Q638 **Lucy Powell:** One aspect of that, you may or may not know, is that the “Victoria Derbyshire” show this morning has done some research. It found that two in three councils that provide nursery services do not employ a single man. This also echoes the Education Policy Institute report out this morning on early years workforce, which found that 97% of teachers in the preschool environment are women. Do you think there is an issue there with role models, the youngest having access to male



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role models, and what more do you think the Government can do to promote men working in the early years sector?

Nadhim Zahawi: I think there is an issue. I was pleased to see the report, which was put out this morning on the "Victoria Derbyshire" programme and picked up by other media, does commend the work that is happening already in the Department, but we do need to do more. One of the areas that we are looking at more is apprenticeships, level 3 apprenticeships, to be able to get more people considering a career in early years, especially males. It is something that is important as role models. As you say, a lack of a male role model is not a good thing. We are very much focused on trying to get more candidates through the system, including using the apprenticeship programme.

Q639 **Lucy Powell:** That is good. Finally on that, there were some other difficult findings in the EPI report. They are about the pipeline coming through and the falling qualification level in early years. I think the apprenticeship route is a very welcome one and I welcome that. But do you think perhaps we need more of a holistic look at the pathway through so that you can join up a bit more and perhaps young men as well as young women can begin that career much earlier on but have a pipeline coming through? The early years providers say to me that there are very few coming through the system.

Nadhim Zahawi: You are absolutely right, I think we do need to take a holistic approach to this. It is something that I have asked my officials to look at.

Q640 **Lucy Powell:** Great. You will come back to us on that?

Nadhim Zahawi: Point well made, and we will come back to you on that.

Q641 **Chair:** Thank you, Minister. I am going to ask you some questions to do with social justice. In 2015, children in London who were eligible for free school meals were 52% more likely to get five good GCSEs than those in other areas of England. What accounts for these variations and what is the Department doing to learn from these success stories?

Nadhim Zahawi: What we are doing in the Department on social justice and social mobility is quite comprehensive. Let me take you through a few of the initiatives: a new £50 million investment, which we are targeting in areas where we have weakest outcomes, to create a new national network of school-led provision to promote and share excellence, including £20 million in school-led professional development for reception settings, which also addresses the previous issue that was raised by Lucy; £50 million to create more high quality school-based nursery provision for disadvantaged children; a new partnership with Public Health England to support children's early speech language and communications needs; a new £5 million to put towards the Education Endowment Foundation to look at evidence of best practice and then to really spread that, to scale that up, to the whole country; and investing a record £6 billion in childcare and early education per year. This includes



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about £2.5 billion on the 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two year-olds over five years and £300 a year per eligible child under the early years pupil premium.

Chair: Can I gently ask for slightly more concise answers, because we have so much to get through?

Nadhim Zahawi: Of course. I will go through on the attainment gap because it is important for the Committee to be aware that we are taking a holistic approach to social mobility. There is the new Future Talent Fund, including a £23 million programme that will trial approaches and present clear recommendations on what really works, so again evidence-based, and a number of other initiatives, including £30 million, supporting 400 schools, evaluating what works there and best practice in retention of teachers in the most disadvantaged areas of our country.

Q642 **Chair:** What you are saying is that there is a number of funding pots to try to deal with this problem.

Nadhim Zahawi: It goes on: there is £75 million for the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund as well.

Chair: Perhaps if you send that to us.

Nadhim Zahawi: We will send it through to you.

Q643 **Chair:** How has the Department decided to select the 12 opportunity areas, and do you have any plans to open similar opportunity areas in areas of similar need?

Nadhim Zahawi: It was based on an index of opportunity cold spots or areas where—

Q644 **Chair:** On what basis will you decide to expand the opportunity cold spots?

Nadhim Zahawi: There are a number of other regions that are just outside that. One would be Northumberland and what I guess—

Q645 **Ian Mearns:** Northumberland is not at the races with South Tyneside or Port of Sunderland, though, is it, or Hartlepool, for goodness sake? Not to have a single opportunity area in the north-east of England is perverse from my perspective.

Nadhim Zahawi: Ian, I knew you were going to make that point and we are looking at this. Let me step back a second. I think what we doing in the opportunity areas is probably the best thing I have seen in the eight years that I have been a Member of Parliament, something I think could really make a difference to what we all care about, which is ultimately making sure every child, every young adult gets the best opportunity in life that we can provide. For me, the definition of a civilised, wealthy society is one that looks after and delivers the best opportunities for the most vulnerable.



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Q646 **Chair:** It is strange there is not one in the north-east or in other very deprived areas of the country.

Nadhim Zahawi: We have other important initiatives in the north-east. But the point I am going to make here is that when I have visited the opportunity areas—I was up in Doncaster to look at the opportunity area—what I was struck by is that the actual action plan was created locally. It was one that was effectively evidence-focused by local experts all coming together to say, “Here is our action plan, here is our deliverables based on research”. That is why we have backed them and funded them. I think that is the best way to deliver real change rather than a bunch of very clever bods in Whitehall deciding what is right for any area.

Q647 **Chair:** I want to move on to another area on childcare. We have this system of childcare subsidies, which is very generous up the income scale. The upper eligibility threshold of 30 hours a week and tax for your childcare is £100,000 per parent. Surely there must be a case for reducing the thresholds that exist for claiming these subsidies and using that money to support poor parents with their childcare costs, especially those who are not working. How can it be right that an MP with young children gets free 30 hours childcare, yet a single parent who is not working doesn’t get that?

Nadhim Zahawi: You make a very important point, Chairman. All I would say, from my interaction with parents and providers and settings—let me give you an example. A couple of weeks ago I was up in—

Q648 **Chair:** I want to intervene on that and give you a statistic. When it comes to literacy, a child who has been in a high quality preschool for two to three years before school starts almost eight months ahead of a child who has not been in preschool. The evidence is there. Surely those parents who are not working should have that right to the free childcare as well. Give us concisely what your view is: yes, can the Government do something on that?

Nadhim Zahawi: We are doing something on that because the evidence that I have seen is local authorities have—so Wigan has an initiative where it focuses on the two-year-old disadvantaged provision to get those parents to think about transition to the free 30 hours for three or four-year-olds by taking on work, by going to work. They have a programme where they bridge the gap, so just before you might get the job they will fund the childcare. With Universal Credit, as we know, you can reclaim 85%, but they bridge that gap for them. What I also have seen is much of the 30 hours for three or four-year-olds is targeted at the lowest paid, so I think you can earn—

Q649 **Chair:** The Government changed the rules following the Committee’s strong recommendations, all of us, about foster carers. Why not extend it to non-working parents? It just seems incredibly wrong for the kids. These parents may not be able to work because they are looking after the child. They may not be able to get work, and we know that it is going to



help the children.

Nadhim Zahawi: That piece of policy was always intended as a nudge to get parents into work, to get people to think about work. The 15 hours for disadvantaged parents and children was something that we brought in because, if you look at OECD figures and other figures, that intervention of 15 hours is important in the attainment gap that you spoke about. The practice on the ground is very much focused on low pay and you see them taking advantage of the 30 hours by thinking about going back to work. I would not want to lose the incentive to get parents to think about going back to work, to think about—

Q650 **Lucy Powell:** Can I go on from that? The figures just do not bear this out, do they? Of the extra £6 billion that the Government have put in on tax free and the extension of the 15 hours and other measures, the vast majority of that—three-quarters of that—will go to the top 50% of earners. Even on the extra 15 hours the take-up is much greater of the higher earners than it is of others. It is going to entrench social immobility rather than promote social mobility.

I will give you another local example. I know you were not the Minister at the time that this was brought in, but this is how it is operating against what you might want it to do. In Manchester, as in other local authorities, like Salford, Lewisham, here in London, Hackney and other places, there has been a long history of providing free preschool nursery provision for families, which we know, as you said at the beginning, is where you really do get social mobility advantage. Those local authorities are now unable to provide that free provision other than to working parents. For example, in Manchester we had previously been targeting that at the most disadvantaged areas. They are now not able to do that and it is the most advantaged areas that are now getting it, so it is actually flipping the money away. Do you not think that the skewing of the funding is now going in the opposite direction?

Chair: If you reduce the threshold of the £100,000, you can then fund many non-working single parents, possibly, and others who are not able to work to also have the free childcare.

Nadhim Zahawi: We are conducting a review. This is obviously the first year of the 30 hours free childcare for three or four-year-olds and I would certainly happily come and look at some of the evidence you suggest.

The evidence I have seen on the ground—I was in a pop-up nursery, which has been rated outstanding, in Staffordshire the other day, and a lady came up to me and said, “You have changed my life”. I thought she was going to berate me for something. She said, “I’ll tell you why, because I work at Tesco’s and so does my husband. We used to have to work shifts to look after our little boy”.

Chair: No, no, but—

Nadhim Zahawi: Let me just get to the point, Chairman, this is really important, “Because of your 30 hours we no longer have to work shifts.



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Our son has come out of his shell because he interacts with children not just with adults and we have a life together”.

Chair: That is a good point.

Nadhim Zahawi: No, let me—

Q651 **Chair:** What I am saying is that I want people who are not able to work, especially single parents who find it very hard to get jobs, to have those opportunities, too, for their children.

Nadhim Zahawi: Yes.

Chair: You have got the message. We are going to move on to—

Lucy Powell: If it is branded as education and not as childcare, then I think people would understand why it is important.

Q652 **Chair:** Yes. Just on the pupil premium, the Sutton Trust surveyed 1,400 teachers and 30% of head teachers said that funds received for disadvantaged students were being used to fill deficits in their budgets. There was evidence that some schools use the pupil premium funding inappropriately or that it is not used as efficiently as it could be. Is there a danger that money is not going to the right places and what is the Department doing to address that?

Nadhim Zahawi: Of course it is up to the school, at the end of the day, how they use the pupil premium. Educational achievement, irrespective of background, is at the heart of what this Government are committed to.

By the way, I think the spend has just gone up from about £11 billion to £13 billion on that. Our latest figure is 2011. Almost £2.5 billion of that alone goes to tackle educational inequality. We know we can do more. With the Education Endowment Foundation, we are looking at something like 7,000 international research reports of how trials in hundreds of English schools can ensure that the pupil premium is being used as it is intended to be used.

Q653 **Chair:** Do you measure where the attainment gaps in schools have narrowed due to the pupil premium? How do you assess it?

Nadhim Zahawi: We basically have the Education Endowment Foundation looking at evidence on this, and I can write to you on how we go through and assess the attainment gap but that, clearly, as you have stated, has—

Q654 **Mr Wragg:** Is it not the case that the school has to account to Ofsted on the outcomes of those pupil premium children and that, therefore, is the route of accountability? Is that the case?

Nadhim Zahawi: Absolutely, it is the case and that was the next point I was going to make.

Q655 **Emma Hardy:** Still talking about pupil premium, as you know, now children up to the age of 18 have to be in compulsory education or



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training or work but pupil premium funding for schools stops at 16. Does the Government have any plans to revisit this and look at sixth form colleges, sixth forms or children staying in schools still receiving pupil premium money? One of the other things we have been investigating is apprenticeships and employers and incentivising employers to take on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Could there be an opportunity for the Department to look into pupil premium funding going to post-16 children taking on an early apprenticeship?

Nadhim Zahawi: Both your questions are outside my area of responsibility, so I will happily write to you on what the position is. At the moment there are no plans to extend the pupil premium.

Q656 **Emma Hardy:** One of the other issues of pupil premium is the fact that you cannot have automatic enrolment. This is something that I have raised a few times, and I was wondering if the Department will start to look at that. Lots of schools are missing out on pupil premium money because the parents are not completing the enrolment forms. Surely—and I have raised this a few times—there can be a way for the Department for Work and Pensions to share information with the Department for Education, to ensure parents have their children automatically enrolled in pupil premium?

Nadhim Zahawi: The difficulty with that, as I understand it, is data protection and not all parents would want to share that data. There are issues of data protection on this, but I will happily write to you on this particular issue.

Q657 **Emma Hardy:** Are there any plans to extend the criteria by which you can get pupil premium, to look at other areas that we have been discussing a lot, the problems children are having with their mental health? Could that be an area where for children who have a diagnosed mental health condition, the school could get pupil premium funding for them?

Nadhim Zahawi: We have a mental health Green Paper out at the moment, which I am sure you have seen.

Q658 **Emma Hardy:** Yes. But at the moment pupil premium is only awarded to children in certain criteria.

Nadhim Zahawi: I understand that.

Emma Hardy: Is the Department thinking about reviewing those criteria, extending those criteria, consulting about those criteria to make sure that children who need additional resources are actually going to get it?

Nadhim Zahawi: We are constantly looking at how we get pupil premium to work better and to focus it on the most disadvantaged, whether it is early years, which I spoke about earlier, or otherwise.

Q659 **Emma Hardy:** Early years do not get it because they are preschool. At the moment it goes to children at school.



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Nadhim Zahawi: I understand. The £300 per year that I talked about earlier goes for preschool. It is something that the Department is constantly looking at but at the moment there are no plans to change where we are.

Q660 **Michelle Donelan:** Following on from that, pupil premium is my major bugbear as well. Don't you think it is about time that we had a massive review of pupil premium? I would argue that it is not necessarily helping the most disadvantaged in our education system because at the moment you have parents who feel that they would be stigmatised if they enrolled their children, particularly in areas like my own constituency of Wiltshire. That is what teachers are regularly telling me. We have schools where they are not necessarily allocating it in the correct way to help those people. You then have children who are disadvantaged through bereavement or mental health or other problems. It is majorly impacting upon their educational attainment.

But we are using only this crude measure of the financial situation of their parents, when there is a plethora of issues that can make a child deprived. Isn't it time that we reviewed that, especially given the context of the fact that we have these metrics in place, we have a much better database? It is possible now to do these things whereas 10 years ago it probably wasn't. But now we are in a position to review it and have a sophisticated system that is helping those and progressing the social mobility, which is the aim of this Government.

Nadhim Zahawi: You are absolutely right to say that we have to make sure that we are constantly improving and reviewing, but it is also worth us putting on record that the pupil premium has meant that the attainment gap, at both age 11 and 16, has reduced, so it is not all bad news. But your point is well made in the sense that it is important that we look at how the pupil premium can do even better.

Q661 **Michelle Donelan:** Just following on quickly, I know we are short of time: what evidence is there to prove that that attainment gap has been reduced solely because of pupil premium, and not a number of other initiatives or the quality of teaching or the other changes that we are introducing?

Nadhim Zahawi: Careful interrogation of the data is important, you are absolutely right. To attribute solely the cause of the reduction in the attainment gap would be certainly foolhardy, if not foolish. Nevertheless, it must have played a major role because before the introduction of pupil premium that attainment gap was there and it has clearly come down. It is one major initiative of a lot of other things we are doing, you are quite right, but you are right to say that it is not the only thing. It cannot be the only thing because we have other things that are happening at the same time. If you can control everything else—my background was in research—and just have that variable, you are right, we can then do better. But it is important that we do interrogate things.



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Q662 **Thelma Walker:** If some people are right and pupil premium funds are being directed away from children to patch up a budget deficit, does that not say more about the pressure head teachers are under to balance their budget? As a former head teacher, I know your focus is on the child, especially vulnerable children and children from a deprived background. What does the fact that maybe some are resorting to direct those funds away from the very children that they are there to support into patching up their budget say about the deficit and what does that say about the situation that most schools are in at the moment with budget cuts?

Nadhim Zahawi: What I would say to that is, first, that should not be happening but also, more importantly, over and above the financial settlement, the Department has invested I think an additional £1.5 billion into the education budget.

Q663 **Thelma Walker:** It is a growing school population. It certainly needs those funds.

Nadhim Zahawi: But it does deal with that in real terms, and so it is unnecessary for that to be happening. That would be my response.

Q664 **Lucy Allan:** Minister, moving on to a very important part of your brief, which is child safeguarding. I particularly want to ask you today about child sexual exploitation, which is a big issue in my constituency and many others up and down the country. We know that the most vulnerable children, those who are in care or on the fringes of care, are least likely to be identified as potential victims and are most likely to be targeted by the perpetrators. What could be done to change those social and cultural attitudes towards young girls on the fringes of care, in care, to help protect them from this hideous crime?

Nadhim Zahawi: I think you are right. Let me begin by commending you, Lucy, for what you have done to highlight the abhorrent crimes that took place in Telford and Wrekin. You have done an incredible job with that. I think it is important that we begin to understand the character of child sexual exploitation and the individuals that commit these crimes. My understanding is there is a project and funding for that.

Lucy Allan: Yes, there is, and that is very welcome, Minister. I would like to thank you for that.

Nadhim Zahawi: That is important, as well as the other measures of course, which I know that the independent review panel is looking at. One of the areas on its radar for this is Telford. But you are absolutely right to say that we have to make sure we are all aware and we all play a part in this. We have a campaign running at the moment to identify the early signs of child abuse. If the Committee has not seen it, I am happy to send you some of that.

Q665 **Lucy Allan:** We hear a lot about training and lessons learned, but do you think that within social services, as a profession, there is a genuine understanding of the social and cultural attitudes that make these



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particular young girls more vulnerable?

Nadhim Zahawi: I think there is. I have been in the job for only a few months but I have managed to get out and see and interact with as many—obviously my part of this is the children and family social work side. There certainly is a strong awareness and recognition that this is something that social services looks at very carefully.

One of the things—and I am sure the Committee is aware of it—we want to improve is information sharing so that the first contact point for the child is not social services necessarily. It could be the police, a GP, an emergency A&E department. There could be all sorts of ways that that initial contact—

Q666 **Lucy Allan:** In my experience, I have seen social services departments underplaying the risk to some of those young, vulnerable children because they dismiss them as being children from a certain background. I would love it—please, Minister—if any time you visit a children’s social services department you could ask them what they are doing to ensure they do not minimise the risk to children who are in care or on the fringes of care.

Nadhim Zahawi: Absolutely. I am heartened that in your own local authority, albeit still requiring improvements, officers have judged that the quality of provision of social services is robust at the moment, so that is pleasing. But you make a very important point.

Katy Willison: We have a very broad programme of reform that tries to tackle both performance in local authorities individually and performance in the workforce across the piece, around improving the quality of practice that influences individual contacts between social workers and the young people and that sort of awareness of risk. The Minister will probably tell you a little bit more about that when we get on to it.

In addition, we know that some local authorities have greater expertise and some have lesser. The CSE response unit that we fund is deliberately designed to be available to local authorities to call upon so that if they identify a problem in their area or they identify their own lack of expertise as something that holds them back, they can go to the response unit and get direct support from them. Those two things together try to tackle the holistic overall quality and also the individual CSE issue if people are feeling a lack of expertise. They are trying to come at it from both sides.

Q667 **Chair:** Thank you. You will be pleased to know we are now going to move on to the fostering report and inquiry that we did. If I could start off generally, the feeling of the Committee was that foster carers were undervalued in training and recognition and I think it was 12% of local authorities were not paying the minimum allowance in complex tax arrangements. We felt that foster children were undervalued, going through huge numbers of placements—we had lots of evidence about this—lacked advocacy rights and were not being placed together with



siblings. The Ofsted report of 2012 suggested that 71% of looked-after children were not placed together. We also felt that the system was undervalued, that it was a postcode lottery and lacked a joined-up approach. Could I get your general views about our fostering report and whether you agree with the context of what I have just set out?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am very grateful, Chairman. Your report is one part—a very important part—of the evidence gathering that we have undertaken. We had an independent review in 2017 and then, of course, your very good report on fostering. Then we commissioned an independent report from Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers, the foster care in England review. I hope you are pleased to see that the word “stocktake” has been expunged from the title of the review because—you are quite right—we are not counting baked beans in a supermarket and it was wrong to use that sort of language in this. There is much in your report that I think is important for us to take seriously and consider, and there is lots of crossover between yours and the independent review that Sir Martin and Mark undertook.

The areas around valuing foster parents—I like to call them parents because I think what they are actually doing is parenting. That does not mean that we are in some way denigrating the biological parent, but I think what foster parents do is incredible; the ones that I have spoken to see themselves as parents. Let’s not forget that we must always remember—as you have done in your report—that it is the child who has to stay front and centre in our decision-making, in our minds, what the child feels and says. That is why advocacy, which is very much in your report and in Sir Martin’s report, is so important. We will look at that in our response, which will be in the spring by the way.

Let me put on the record that we have not responded to your report as quickly as you would probably have wished us to do, but I hope you agree with me that combining yours with the independent report from Sir Martin and Mark and other evidence and then responding holistically is probably a better approach.

On the issue of money and payment, I would not want to see, and the Department does not want to see, any foster parent being out of pocket because of what they do for the children in their care. That is an important point to make. I think the Fostering Network had a number where 70 local authorities were paying below the level they should be paying at. When we dug beneath that data, it was not as straightforward as that in the sense that many of those 70 were probably 50p or £1 below where they should be. Of course, it is right that both your Committee and the Department call upon those authorities to do better and to get to the right level of payment.

In the independent report, which we are looking at very seriously, obviously, as well as the other evidence, they felt that the financial element of this was not as big an issue as some of the other issues that



you mention. But all of them are really important. The thing to remember is let's keep the child as the most important—

Q668 Chair: Just to confirm that the direction of travel is dealing with the problem of placements, the problem of siblings, advocacy rights for the children, foster carers' recognition—we propose national college recognition of foster carers—and dealing with the postcode lottery and the system as a whole. Would you say that is the direction of travel of the Government, yes or no?

Nadhim Zahawi: The direction of travel for the Government is to look at all these things very seriously. Let me take siblings as an example. I think of course it must be right, where it is in the child's interest, to have them placed as siblings together in the same foster home. Where we are challenged is where we have a number of siblings, a larger number of children, because of the more difficult provision of size of house.

You are right to say we have to look at sufficiency, and I think the challenges around that that you highlight, as well as the independent report highlights, is how do we get this right? In the independent report they suggest there is something like 17,000 foster parents who currently do not have a foster child with them. That does not mean it is not a problem because in the more complex cases with those children we do have a problem with sufficiency, so we need to look at that more seriously and all the other issues that you mention.

Q669 Ian Mearns: Of the many reasons that youngsters are taken into care in the first place, poverty is one of the variable determinants that adds to the mix quite often that leads to children being taken into care. You may not be aware but the Equality and Human Rights Commission published a report today looking at what it anticipates to be, because of the cumulative impact of tax and welfare reform, another 1.5 million children being in the poverty trap by 2021. With that in mind, and thinking about the review that has been undertaken by Martin Narey and Mark Owers, and of course our own Select Committee report, what next steps will you be taking forward on the recommendations of both of those reports in order to make sure that the whole position for the foster caring field is improving as opposed to deteriorating because of the forecasts that we are seeing from the Equality and Human Rights Commission?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have not seen that report and will happily look at it.

Ian Mearns: It has literally only been published today.

Nadhim Zahawi: Ian, I would push back a little bit and say this Government's policies, since 2010, have taken more children out of absolute poverty, I think something like 600,000 children out of absolute poverty. But let's not have that political debate here because I think the important thing to remember while we are here is to talk about children who are in care, and we want to do the best for them. We are taking your report and the other evidence, including Sir Martin and Mark's report, as



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part of what we want to see happen, to make sure that we have a system that is fit for purpose.

Clearly, the fostering system in the UK, according to the independent report, is one that is good and probably one of the best in the world, but that does not mean we don't need to improve it. The Chairman has quite rightly already outlined a number of areas that both your report and others have recommended. What we are doing, if I step back for a second and describe for the Committee very briefly, Chairman, is not just looking at fostering. We have had a number of reviews: of adoption, we have looked at residential care. We are taking a holistic approach to deliver an infrastructure, is the way I like to describe it. That means we can do the best we can for those children.

What do I mean by that? It is not only the fostering element to this but looking at child social work and social care. Social workers are incredibly committed and passionate and do an incredible job. Many of us will have cases in our surgery on a Friday on this. By the time we are through the 20 minutes, half an hour, we are hardly able to breathe let alone think, whereas most social workers do this day in, day out, so I truly commend them. But we are launching Social Work England as the regulator, as well as making sure that we have a really robust accreditation and assessment process in place, so we deliver over all the infrastructure, including the safeguarding panel, and of course then the whole issue of making sure that we continue to innovate in this area. The investment we are making into innovation is about £200 million at the moment, to see what really works and how we can do so much better.

There is a holistic approach and it is not just a piecemeal, "Let's try to intervene here or there where we see a problem or a fire fight". We are taking a strategic approach, so by the end of this process, when all this stuff is bedded in, I think we will have a system that is best of breed.

Q670 Ian Mearns: What sort of timescale are we looking at for formal responses and action plans leading from those formal responses to both of those reports?

Nadhim Zahawi: We have committed that we will respond by the spring.

Q671 Lucy Allan: I am glad to hear you say, Minister, that you are going to be looking at the care system holistically. The fostering review that has just been conducted has been criticised quite roundly by the profession for not going far enough, particularly because there are so many much needed reforms to the system as a whole. Could you tell me a bit more about how you see this holistic approach being put into place? As a Committee we have asked—and I have asked in questions before your appointment—that there should be a fundamental review of the whole care system. Is that something you are now considering, given what you have been saying about a holistic approach?



Nadhim Zahawi: I think we have had all the reviews we need, genuinely. I have only been in the job for a few months but I came from a business background into politics. I think we actually know what we need to do. We have had the policy and the legislation through Parliament. We just now have to deliver all the stuff.

You are right that there are gaps in this particular independent review. Mental health, for example, is a gap but we have a mental health Green Paper on this. It is now all about focusing our energy and our resources on implementation, whether it is making sure that the workforce—as I explained in a previous answer, the passion and commitment for the work they do is undoubted but, nevertheless, they themselves would recognise that there are gaps in quality in the country. We talked about the postcode lottery. We know there are far too many local authorities who are either inadequate or require improvement.

Q672 **Lucy Allan:** But just back to this review, do you think there are enough thorough recommendations within it that will really tackle the core complex issues that face the care system? I think it is skimming across the surface, so I would like your view.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am not articulating this very well, but this is one part of a much greater strategic plan that we have that I can talk you through. I could spend hours just going through each and every part of it. I have talked to you about the social care reforms, that we are recruiting—

Q673 **Lucy Allan:** We cannot see this plan. I have been on this Committee in this Parliament and the previous Parliament. I don't sense that there is this holistic plan. I welcome a new face at the table with that in mind and that being part of your plan, but this particular report does not appear to tackle core, complex issues that face the whole of the care system and I would like your commitment that you intend to do that.

Nadhim Zahawi: From what I have seen to date as the new Minister, we have done all the reviews we need across the whole of the care system. We know what we need to do and we now have to deliver it. Whether it is the improvement plans to local authorities through the partners in practice, whether it is on the—

Q674 **Lucy Allan:** One more question moving on from that. There has been, and you will be aware of this, a relentless increase in the numbers of children entering into the care system. It has been going up year on year on year on year. We are now at around 73,000 children within the care system. There are those within the profession who say, "This is too high, this is too far". What are your views?

Nadhim Zahawi: You are absolutely right to say that the numbers have gone up. In fact, if you look at the numbers, the way I see it is there are just under 73,000 where we are responsible. The corporate parent is the Government, effectively, and we have to do better for them in every possible way including—let me tackle this very briefly—through their



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whole life, not just for the period where they are in formal foster placements but the staying put programme that we have delivered. There are some interesting examples in Birmingham where they are paying for 100 children from the care system to go to university. They deliver 52 weeks a year residential accommodation.

Lucy Allan: The one fundamental way of reducing the number of children going into care is to strengthen and support families. I would like to see that being part of your mission because I believe that children do better in a strong but maybe imperfect family than in an imperfect care system.

Q675 **Chair:** On the point of Lucy's question about having a proper study into looked-after children—just to give you one example of why we think this is right and why Lucy is right—the *Times Educational Supplement*, which you may have seen, on 23 February published that looked-after children, in terms, are waiting nearly a year for a place when they are forced to switch schools. They said, according to their investigation, it can take nearly a year for children in care to be accepted at a mainstream school after applying during the academic year. Almost a tenth of applications for in-year school admissions made on behalf of a child in care are not accepted within the statutory framework of 20 working days. Applications to non-maintained schools are half as likely to be accepted within the deadline as those to maintained schools. This is the reason that Lucy wants a proper review of children in care, but why is this happening?

Nadhim Zahawi: You raise an incredibly important point. One of the first things I raised when I was made Minister was to look at education availability for looked-after children and their attainment and what more we can do. I am looking at this very seriously at the moment. You are right to highlight that as an issue. We do have an exclusions review, which the Prime Minister announced and Edward Timpson is leading on, because looked-after children are disproportionately represented in those exclusion orders. These are all important areas that we have to look at.

Q676 **Chair:** There are different reasons given, which I will not go into here, different arguments about why this is happening, but the crucial thing is vulnerable looked-after children are being denied a mainstream education for long periods of time, sometimes indefinitely—as the *Times Educational Supplement* indicates—and it is right across the country according to the FOI request that the newspaper did. I want to know what the Government are doing about this. It is a major social injustice in our education system if such a thing is happening.

Nadhim Zahawi: I totally agree with you, Chairman, and it is an area that I am looking at very seriously, as we speak, but also we have the exclusions review.

Q677 **Lucy Allan:** Do you agree that care should not be the only tool in the box when dealing with children at risk and that there are other ways of supporting children and families? At the moment we are seeing children



being taken into care because there is no other way of ensuring their safety. Shouldn't there be other tools in the box to enable children to stay safely at home?

Nadhim Zahawi: Of course wherever possible you would want the child to stay safely at home with their biological parents. But also—and I hesitate to say this to you—remember we are in a position of responsibility here, and words matter and leadership matters. If you go out and just say that, without considering what is right for the child, what we need to always remember—and I opened by saying this—is: what is right for the child? Where is the support system for the child? Is the social worker doing the best they can, which they try to do? Do they have the tools available to them to do what is best for that child? The bulk of them are with foster parents. About 54,000, roughly, are in foster care.

Q678 **Lucy Allan:** At the end of your term, will we see more children in care or fewer?

Nadhim Zahawi: I would like to see fewer children in care because, of course, as you quite rightly said, Lucy, it is strengthening families that really matters, including support for families in the education system or elsewhere in Government and that does require cross-Government working.

Katy Willison: I think what the Minister is trying to say is, if you take the foster care report—I have read some of the criticisms of it as glossing over and only looking at the surface—it is only one small part of what the Government are trying to look at in this space. We are trying to build on putting children first, which sets out the overall picture of what the Government were trying to do to improve social work. That takes us back to the criticisms of Eileen Munro about social work becoming too risk averse and into exactly the points that you are making about is it too risk averse and does that mean that social workers are putting children in care when they don't need to be.

The programme that we have about empowering social workers to practise confidently, rather than to carry out checklists and to work in a very risk-averse way, is all about that particular issue. The innovation programme that we have going is trying to support local authorities with looking at innovative ways to support families earlier, to make sure that local authorities know what best practice and what evidence-based practice is in order to make the best decisions for those children.

We know that some people don't like the report that Martin and Mark did and we know that some people don't like bits of it, and we are absolutely listening to those people. Our teams are going out there and talking to the critics. They are talking to some of the people who also quite like it. It is one part—your report is a really important part—and that report is important. We also commissioned a literature review and we are talking to young people. All of those things come together, so that we can look at them in a whole and make sure that we are thinking about what we



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can do best for the foster care system within that context of our wider reforms.

Q679 Emma Hardy: You still do not seem to be quite aware of the point that Lucy is making, which I think is supported by everybody on this Committee. What we are talking about is early intervention and support for families, and we believe that that early intervention and support for families is simply not there and is contributing to the increased number of children who are going into the care system. It might be partly because social workers are risk averse but I think it is a lot more to do with the fact that social workers are overworked and overstretched and, therefore, only able to support families when they enter crisis. They do not have the ability to help them in those early intervention stages.

In my constituency there has been an extra 140 children who are now being looked after. Hull City Council has to be the highest in the country, if not the highest number of looked-after children, because the social workers are creaking under their caseloads at the moment. What we would like is a commitment from Government to look at and fund early intervention properly, not piecemeal and patchy around the country—and I know about the troubled families programme—but proper, intensive support for families so that not all the children have to end up in the care system.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am glad you mentioned the troubled families programme, but let's not go into that area. You are right, early intervention is important. We do have a piece of work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to look at funding. Although local authorities have increased funding on children's care, I think it is about—

Q680 Emma Hardy: We were talking about early intervention to help children. We are not making a political statement.

Nadhim Zahawi: I hear you. I absolutely hear you. Let's take the politics out of this and let's do what is right for the child.

Emma Hardy: Yes.

Nadhim Zahawi: I saw an example in Wigan where they were able to share data because the health worker, who goes into the home of a young couple, can almost identify before the baby is born that that family will probably need early intervention. I go back and say to you that if we get smarter sometimes at sharing data within Government I think we can make a bigger difference.

Q681 Emma Hardy: Even if you share data, if you do not have the people there to support them that is not going to be helpful.

Nadhim Zahawi: As I said to you, we are looking at the whole funding issue. We have a piece of work out at the moment with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, looking at funding,



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although funding for this area has actually gone up in real terms since 2010.

Emma Hardy: So have the numbers of looked-after children.

Nadhim Zahawi: Nevertheless, it is not to make political points here. Back to the subject, if we want to do the right thing—

Q682 **Emma Hardy:** Does the Department prioritise early intervention? Does it see that as something that is really important?

Nadhim Zahawi: Of course we do and that is why we have so many initiatives in that intervention.

Q683 **Emma Hardy:** Do you accept that the Department needs to do more about it?

Nadhim Zahawi: We are doing and I can send you—because I know the Chairman is very conscious of timekeeping—everything we are doing in this area.

Q684 **Michelle Donelan:** I want to take us back to the review and some of the criticisms that were alluded to before. I appreciate a review is never going to be taken on board by everybody, but the criticisms were about how it was actually done as well. There was the problem of some people asked whether the review was based on the evidence taken, whether it reflected the comprehensive literature review and the weight given to personal opinions. I want to have your feedback on that, because criticising some of the points made is very different to criticising how those points became points in the first place.

Nadhim Zahawi: Clearly, it is an independent review, so I am not here to defend the review. It is one piece of evidence that we have as well as your report.

Q685 **Michelle Donelan:** But it is a substantial one, isn't it?

Nadhim Zahawi: It is a substantial one, absolutely right. But from my reading of all the work that was done, it was very much based on, I think, 300 responses, if I am not mistaken.

Katy Willison: That is right. There was a call for evidence.

Nadhim Zahawi: A call for evidence and 60% of those who responded were individual foster parents. The Children's Commissioner then also had a survey out, so we got the voice of the child in that. I think the evidence is robust. People may not agree with it, people may find gaps in it, but the evidence is pretty robust.

Q686 **Michelle Donelan:** Looking at some of the specific claims, there was no reference to the Fostering Network's State of the Nation report, which had 2,530 foster carers' input—which compares quite dramatically to the 300—and it was the biggest survey of its kind. The second thing is that in the conclusion they said the IROs should be abolished, but there was only



one reference in the actual report to them. That was a reference to some carers believing that they should be improved as a policy. The third one is the sweeping statement about kinship where it said that a large proportion of parents' contact is not in the child's interest. However, this is a very complicated area and it depends very much on the individual circumstances not on evidence to the contrary.

Those are just three of the specific examples questioning the evidence. My concern is that if you are using our report and that report as your key documents and there are questions over the legitimacy of some of the claims and conclusions in one of those, is that not a little bit worrying?

Nadhim Zahawi: We will look very carefully at all the evidence. You mentioned the independent review issue that was in the report. We have had letters and correspondence, lobbying from stakeholders in that area taking issue with that, but we will look at all this very carefully in our response. As I said, this is not our report. It is an independent report and that is the purpose of it. We have to go away now and look at all the evidence. Where we need to dig deeper and just understand a little bit better, we will absolutely do that. Nevertheless, I think it is an important report and the voice of the foster parent does come through that report and, more important than that, the child.

Q687 **Michelle Donelan:** I appreciate it is not your report, but it was an independent report commissioned by the Department.

Nadhim Zahawi: Absolutely. It is an important report but it is one of a number of pieces of evidence that we will take into account. Rest assured that we will look at all this and where there are areas of criticism from the Fostering Network—by the way, I should have mentioned earlier, Chairman, it talks about your very good idea for the college. I think some of the work the Fostering Network does on training is an area that I will probably want to explore with the Committee and your vision for that training. I am a little bit worried about the connotations of a college and professionalism because I don't see fostering—

Mr Wragg: Minister, I am going to come on to that later, I can assure you.

Nadhim Zahawi: I shall hold back, William.

Q688 **Thelma Walker:** Minister, the Staying Put initiative, which allows young people being fostered to stay with their carer until they are 21, is a really laudable initiative, as I am sure you will agree. But the capacity of the system, if foster carers are directed to continue their support of a young person until they are 21, means fewer are available in the system. Also, the allowances for carers are, I believe, less than the rest of the age group that are being cared for. How do you see the balance of caring for the older scale of young people in care and the capacity of the system to support them?

Nadhim Zahawi: It is an excellent question. When we looked at the initiative of Staying Put, which clearly is the right one and is working, and



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looked at the pilot, there was something like a 20% take-up in the pilot but in the real world, when we rolled it out, the take-up was much bigger than that. It is about 50% of young people choosing to stay put.

Thelma Walker: But it is only 50%. It is about—

Nadhim Zahawi: I hear you. I am just trying to give you a bit of background to this, that is all. What is really interesting is they don't all take up the offer for three years. They take up maybe a shorter period of that, rather than the full three years. I think we have to keep monitoring this but your point on sufficiency in the system itself is—

Q689 **Thelma Walker:** Will your Department commit to resourcing both for the foster carers and for the young person to make sure we have that capacity? It will take extra funding.

Nadhim Zahawi: In our response we will be responding to the issue of capacity. There are a number of recommendations in the evidence as to how we deal with capacity.

Q690 **Thelma Walker:** But with a fair allowance for the foster carers.

Nadhim Zahawi: With fair allowance. I don't want to see any foster parent being out of pocket is probably the best thing I can say to you on that.

Q691 **Thelma Walker:** You are committed?

Nadhim Zahawi: We will respond to you. I don't want to pre-empt our response to you. I am sure I will be before your Committee being scrutinised on every word and paragraph in that response, but I don't want to pre-empt that yet because we are in that period where we are assessing everything.

Q692 **Emma Hardy:** Following on that, to get to a situation where it is a sector-wide national norm that children can stay until they are older so that it is more like a family and offers the stability, permanence and security that is essential for their mental health and their long-term development, do you believe that the biggest challenge at the moment is that allowance and the fact that it goes down and the foster parents cannot afford to offer that home for longer? Do you think that is the biggest challenge to making that 50% into 100%?

Nadhim Zahawi: I cannot say to you that I believe that is the biggest challenge today. As I said, we are looking at all the evidence. You mention permanence, which again comes through the independent review, as one of the big areas that could make a huge difference. If you think about it just from a human aspect, you do not stop having that feeling for that family. I had a round table with adults who were in care. I said, "How do you think about your foster parent?" which is what I think we should call them. One of them said, "I call her 'my white mum' and she is still very much part of my life now that I have moved on and have



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my life and profession and everything else". Permanence is clearly an important issue and I think it will absolutely form part of our response.

Katy Willison: We could not say at the moment that it is definitely the funding that is stopping that 50%. I suspect one of the reasons is that Staying Put is still relatively early in its initiative. One of the things we have found with Staying Put is that it is really important to talk to families early on in their fostering life about whether they are going to have a Staying Put arrangement. It is probably too late if you start talking to somebody when the child is 15, 16, 17. You need to think about if it is a long-term arrangement quite early on. There are lots of things we need to understand about Staying Put and what it will do to help people make that longer term commitment. Funding is one part of it but it is not necessarily the only part of it.

Q693 **Michelle Donelan:** No, but it must be a major challenge because, if you are leaving families struggling and it is not economically viable to continue to home that individual, it would be impossible to do so, so it must be one of the major challenges.

Katy Willison: It is obviously significant, but you are at this point where the child is in a different stage of their life of going on to university or employment or different outcomes. I think it is right that we have a different arrangement but we need to make sure that we keep looking at this to see that we get as much of it happening as possible.

Q694 **Emma Hardy:** Moving on slightly from Staying Put to talking about children who are in residential care, at the moment children who are in residential care do not have the opportunity to stay put with their foster carers because they are not with foster carers. Children in residential care can often be the most disadvantaged and most vulnerable. I mentioned this last time to Ms Willison when I was talking to your predecessor about this, because it is something I feel quite strongly about. Children who are in residential care, when they get to 18 that is it. There is no opportunity for any extra care whatsoever.

Their concern is that there is a two-tier care system, that they are seen as the underclass of people leaving care, they feel like social workers are not going to give them a real choice about where to go because social workers will be keen to place them in family placements even if they might want to be in residential care, because they know at 18 these young people are not going to get any more support. If you have the project going forward of Staying Put, surely we need something for children leaving residential care until they are 21. Does your Department have any plans to introduce anything?

Katy Willison: I am not sure we talked fully about this last time as I think we ran out of time.

Emma Hardy: Yes.



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Katy Willison: We do have an initiative called Staying Close that we are piloting at the moment, which looks very precisely at this point. We have eight innovation projects that are looking at placing a child in a location close to the residential care home where they were and providing them with a key worker and providing them with a connection back to that home, so that they can go back for dinner or to do their laundry, that sort of thing. We are piloting that at the moment to see how we can make that work and roll out another stage.

Q695 **Emma Hardy:** Do you have a timeframe for when you think that might go out nationally or—

Katy Willison: At the moment, we are relatively early stages with the pilots and we need to see how they work before we make that further commitment, but it is something that we are very actively looking at.

Q696 **Emma Hardy:** Would you be able to send more information about that to the Committee?

Nadhim Zahawi: Absolutely.

Katy Willison: We can certainly send you more about the Staying Close pilots, yes.

Q697 **Emma Hardy:** This question is really about the contact. I was looking at some of the information from our fantastic report, and it says here that the report that has been produced by the Government appears to selectively choose evidence to back up the claim that a large proportion of parental contact is not in the child's interest. There seems to be a bit of a conflict here. The fostering review stated that the presumption in favour of contact was removed in the Children and Families Act 2014, but the British Association of Social Workers stated that the section on contact was misleading. Who is correct when it comes to children's contact with siblings and contact with parents, because there seems to be a lot of conflicting points of view?

Nadhim Zahawi: First of all, it is not the Government's report. It is an independent report.

Q698 **Emma Hardy:** An independent report, so who is correct?

Nadhim Zahawi: I take the view that what is right for the child is what should happen. If it is right for that child to have more contact with their biological parent, that is what should happen.

Q699 **Chair:** Has the presumption in favour of contact in the Children and Families Act 2014 been removed? That is what we want to know. There is a dispute about that because the British Association of Social Workers is arguing that what has been said by the Martin Narey review is misleading.

Nadhim Zahawi: I will have to come back to you on that because that is the first time I have heard that it is somehow misleading.



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Q700 **Chair:** Ms Willison, could I ask your view?

Katy Willison: I have not seen that letter or that criticism, so it is something that we can write to you on.

Q701 **Chair:** Are you able to answer the question of whether or not the presumption in favour of contact has been removed from the Children and Families Act 2014?

Katy Willison: No. I cannot answer that question to you directly now. What I can say is that we are very happy to look at the issue of contact. Again, it was an independent report and, for us, it meant that the position maintains that it is around what are the child's best interests regardless.

Chair: If you could let us know.

Katy Willison: Yes, we can.

Q702 **Trudy Harrison:** Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers suggested that getting rid of independent reviewing officers could save somewhere in the order of £54 million to £76 million. Is this something that you agree with or do you feel it could be saving money at the risk of improving children's lives?

Nadhim Zahawi: I don't think any of this is about saving money. This issue is about doing what is right for the child. The reports are for us to be able to come back and deliver our position. I think the Committee accepts that it is right to gather the evidence, which is why we commissioned an independent report and why your report is so important to us.

This is a complex area and we have heard from independent reviewers how important it is that there is that check and balance in place in the system, although we have also heard the opposite. I have here a testament from a foster parent who says it is a box-ticking exercise. But I say to you that we will look at the evidence very clearly. What we want to do is do what is right for the child.

Your report says advocacy is very important. It comes through the voice of the child where they say, "I feel much more empowered, much more confident to say what I feel because I have had the right advocate", so it is a really important issue. We are looking at all these issues. We have obviously had the independent report but also the stakeholders involved have not been slow to come back to us and say what we do is really important in offering that check and balance and the safety issue around the child, and we have to make sure we get that right.

Q703 **Trudy Harrison:** What we heard from the young people was that it was dependent on the person as to how effective the advocacy role was. Therefore, is it not really important to ensure that we have the right person and adequate training for that vital position?



Nadhim Zahawi: You make a very important point, Trudy.

Q704 **Thelma Walker:** You have said many times that it is about the rights of the child and the child should be at the centre of everything, but concerns have been voiced by the Children's Commissioner and the Action for Children charity about feeling very strongly that we should not get rid of the IROs. How do you feel about that? People who are working essentially for the rights of children are saying that they have concerns about getting rid of them.

Nadhim Zahawi: That is why, before we respond in the spring, we will look at all these issues and any areas where we think that we have to collect more evidence or look at why they are saying this versus the independent report. We will look at this very carefully, be assured.

Q705 **Mr Wragg:** I was very encouraged by your opening remarks, Minister, about how you see your Department working to improve the status of foster carers, but I wonder if I could go through a few areas highlighted in the report as to how the Department could do that and achieve that. You alluded to it in an earlier question, but the first is financial support. How might the Department improve the status of foster carers by addressing that issue?

Nadhim Zahawi: Our position—and I hope I have been clear about this—is that no foster parent should be out of pocket for the work they do. We have to make sure that that happens. Over and above the financial support, there is the incentive through the taxation system that is advantageous to foster parents. There should not be a situation where a foster parent is out of pocket for the fantastic work they do.

Q706 **Mr Wragg:** That leads me neatly into the employment status because, as you may be aware, the Select Committee recommended that probably it was not appropriate for foster carers to be classed as self-employed. Some of the evidence we had said that they had all the responsibilities of being self-employed but none of the advantages, none of the benefits there. Do you think there is a case for changing the employment status of foster carers in that respect?

Nadhim Zahawi: Foster parents are self-employed or that is how they—

Mr Wragg: That is how they are at the moment.

Katy Willison: It may not be the best way, but effectively being self-employed for tax purposes is the way that the Government gives them that advantageous position. In looking at this, we would need to be careful. Going back to your first question about the overall status, we need to look in the round at the position for foster carers, foster parents, and all the benefits that they get. One of the things they say to us very frequently, the thing they are after most, is being treated as experts or professionals by the people around the child. It is a bigger picture than just looking at one issue.



Q707 Chair: In our report at paragraph 55 we said, "The taxation system is also unclear and complex for many carers and as tax exemption thresholds for carers have been in place for more than a decade, many carers are being taxed on money given to them as their child's allowance, in essence costing them to foster". You said you valued them as foster parents, which I have a lot of sympathy with. How can that be right? Surely you have to do something about that?

Nadhim Zahawi: We will look at this very carefully. Martin Narey's report suggested that, from all the evidence, funding is not the issue. It is about how they are inadequate. We will look at it. Your report presented a different view on this.

Let me just pick up a point that Katy made. What foster parents tell us is that they want to be seen as experts and taken as a professional view and a respected view of how a child's parenting should be. Where I would just caveat that, which is an important point, is that I would not want them to become professionals, as in a profession.

Q708 Mr Wragg: We just nailed that one at the very end of that question. In terms of the training provided, clearly there is a statutory obligation for a local authority to provide 12 months of training. How sure are you, as a Department, that that is taking place adequately? What about after those 12 months?

Nadhim Zahawi: From the interaction I have had with foster parents, training is an issue. It is not so much the rules around it but how it is being implemented, especially the issue of showing affection and where they are behaving more like a parent than anything else. It is important we look closely at that in our response and make sure that we get that. The difference between what it says on a piece of paper and what happens on the ground is zero. It does happen.

Q709 Mr Wragg: It is a sensitive area, but there has been quite a substantial increase in the number of allegations made by a foster child against a foster carer. Would the Department consider the extension of the Public Interest Disclosure Act, I think 2014, to ensure that foster carers are covered by that? It is important to balance the nature and importance of an allegation made but also the extreme sensitivity as to the impact that has upon a foster carer. It is a very specific question.

Nadhim Zahawi: It is a very specific question. You are right to say that it is an issue. I have had foster parents saying to me that one of the issues—one said to me, "On a Sunday, with my own family, we come downstairs in our pyjamas and we are under the duvet and we watch a movie, yet I can't do that with the foster child" because they are so worried about the issues around it.

Q710 Mr Wragg: There is always going to be sensitivity there. I meant an actual allegation being made. I recognise it is a very specific question.

If I can close by getting on to the issue of the whole debate about



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professionalization, there are some calls for a college: I think the report says it. You use the words “foster parent”, quite rightly. If there is a foster carer college, ought there not also be a parenting college? You see there the question of how do you professionalise a relationship. What is your answer to that?

Nadhim Zahawi: Good parenting, and back to the issue about stability of families, is an important area and an area that we should look at, even if you just look at the home learning environment and what more you can do there. It is certainly a very important area that we should look at in our response in the spring. But you make a very important point. There is a great opportunity, and I am beginning to see some of the stuff, of using technology so this does not have to be a big investment in physical infrastructure and easier to scale up.

Mr Wragg: We are not talking about institutionalising. I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

Q711 **Lucy Powell:** Getting back to some of the points about the system as a whole that we raised earlier—and, by the way, Lucy is our resident expert on these things so I would heed her advice, if you want my advice—we are at a chronic crisis point now when it comes to demand and funding. The number of children taken into care is now at its highest level since 1985. The number of child protection plans has doubled in the last 10 years, yet most deprived councils have had their children’s services budgets cut by a quarter and the overspend in children’s services across local authorities is absolutely enormous, well over £600 million. Is that not why council leaders of all parties are now saying, “We are at crisis point with demand and funding not matching at all”?

Nadhim Zahawi: Let me say a couple of things on that. First, something I have already said in our session here today is that we have a piece of work out looking at funding with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. That is important.

Q712 **Lucy Powell:** What does that piece of work consist of? More money?

Nadhim Zahawi: We want to look at the evidence. We have channelled more money into the system, including £200 million into the innovation programme, a further £20 million for those authorities—

Lucy Powell: I will come on to that in a minute. The demand is absolutely at its highest.

Nadhim Zahawi: I hear you and this is crucial. There is very little correlation, if at all, between the cost in a local authority for delivering good childcare and safeguarding, and all the other good children’s services in a local authority, and the amount of money they spend. Much of the evidence suggests it is about leadership. If I look at the councils that have been turned around—Doncaster being one—it is about having a strong leadership. But it is not just strong leadership. It is about having leadership that is consistent, that the workforce believes will be in place



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for x number of years and there is not this constant change at the top with different priorities being set.

Many of the workforce in Doncaster were there when the council was failing very badly. Yet they are the same people who are doing great work now, and I was up there to congratulate them on this. The same again for what I saw in Hackney with the turnaround, which was way before my time, in 2006. Much of this stuff is about good leadership. I hear it from the directors of children's services and chief executives.

To simply focus just purely on let's chuck more money at this and it will solve itself—it will not.

Q713 Lucy Powell: That brings me on to my second point. That is not what we recommended anyway because we were trying to give you a concrete recommendation. We heard much of that same evidence too. What was very clear was that it is very hard to flip around that situation without having some of that stopgap innovation funding that the Department has made available. That is why we recommended that the innovation funding part be extended and be doubled in size to allow more capacity in the system to flip to new models, new ways of working. Is that something—

Nadhim Zahawi: The funding we have at the moment is £200 million for innovation.

Lucy Powell: But it is closed as well.

Nadhim Zahawi: I hear you, but with that there is an important piece of work, which we have not touched much on today; I mentioned it earlier. It is the Partners in Practice programme where good performing local authorities can help the ones that are inadequate or needing improvement. You see interesting work. Let me give you an example. Leeds has partnered with Kirklees to help Kirklees to improve the outcomes. What they discovered was that in Kirklees they had something like a 30% increase in referrals and they did not understand it. The first response—I am not judgmental here at all—was, "Let's just throw more money at this because clearly it is a firefighting issue". What Leeds did to help them was say, "Hold on a second, just step back. Instead of just throwing money because you have had a 30% increase, let's understand the underlying issue here of why have you had the 30% increase". Do social workers—back to Katy's very good point—have the confidence to make the right decision on behalf of that child in that case?

Q714 Lucy Powell: That is clearly the case, and our report makes that clear, but money does allow that capacity.

Nadhim Zahawi: Just on that, one of my real priorities is to embed the Partners in Practice and put the governance model in place so that all the Partners in Practice are able to have KPIs that regionally they can hold themselves to but we can also look at and you can scrutinise and say, "Okay, so you are a Partner in Practice, what have you done?"



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Q715 Lucy Powell: I would ask you to look at that innovation funding and doubling that. You gave an example earlier of Wigan, which is a Greater Manchester model, but we have not been able to get full access to the funding we need to make those transformations.

On the final point about the system as a whole, 80%, I think, of local authorities are branded as “requires improvement” or “inadequate”. Do you think that those one-word vindications of a very complex children’s services is telling the full picture? Is that fit for purpose now? Can it be a true reflection of the children’s services as a whole?

Nadhim Zahawi: No, in the sense that that cannot be right. That is why we are investing so much in an infrastructure, which I can talk about to you for hours, on the Partners in Practice, on what works, on making sure that we got the panel right. All these things require further embedding. It is early days. We have 23 that are inadequate but we have also lifted about 40 local authorities out of “inadequate” to either “good” or “requires further improvement”, and they have remained there. They have not fallen back.

We have some successes but we have to do a lot more, which is why I am determined, and I take on anyone who would argue otherwise. Rather than doing more reviews or looking at another policy, let us just deliver this. Let us just get on with what clearly is working. Leaders, directors of children’s services and the frontline are telling us it is working, so let us just stay focused. Far too often in Government we keep finding other things to do in a response to a particular problem.

Q716 Lucy Powell: It is maybe looking at those words, because “requires improvement” is probably the new “satisfactory” or the new “good”. We heard very clearly from some of the great leaders, Doncaster and elsewhere, that those Ofsted judgments reducing a very broad set of services, very complex services, to one word makes their job much harder.

Katy Willison: It is worth saying that the Ofsted framework is changing; there is a new Ofsted framework in place. It does continue to use some of those overall judgments but it is a much more rounded annual conversation between Ofsted and the local authorities, looking at where they can improve as a joint process rather than Ofsted doing the traditional swooping in. It is worth looking at the new framework, because it does change it quite fundamentally.

Q717 Chair: One final question, Minister. Although the figures show that there are technically enough foster carers, 72,670, the Fostering Network suggests that 7,600 new foster families are needed to meet the need because, although we have a surplus, they are not necessarily the right kind of foster carers. What is your view about that? Do we need those 7,600? Is the Fostering Network right?

Nadhim Zahawi: They are certainly making a point that comes through in the independent review as well, in the sense that we have, numbers-



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wise, sufficient numbers, if you remember that there are 17,000 foster parents who currently do not have a foster child in place. But where I think they have a good point is with the more complex placements, the higher skilled foster parent.

Chair: Do not forget that in some regions of the country there are more than others.

Nadhim Zahawi: You took the words out of my mouth, Chairman—some regions around the country. There is an issue about how we look at sufficient, how we can get—

Q718 **Chair:** Should there be a national recruitment campaign? What would you do about it?

Nadhim Zahawi: How would a national recruitment campaign work? We need to understand where the gaps are and focus the money more effectively. There are recommendations in the report on how you begin to look at where your gaps are. I would favour a much more targeted approach rather than a scattergun approach on this, but it is an important area that we have to look at. There are some recommendations about purchasing.

Chair: It is good that you do acknowledge this is an area. Thank you very much, both of you. Thank you for your time, Ms Willison, and for your service. Thank you.