

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Accountability hearings](#), HC 262

Wednesday 16 September 2020

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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 130 - 230

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Secretary of State for Education, Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education, and Michelle Dyson, Director for Qualifications, Curriculum and Extra-Curricular, Department for Education .

Written evidence from witnesses:



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Susan Acland-Hood, and Michelle Dyson.

Q130 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Thank you for coming today. For the benefit of the tape and those watching on TV and the internet, could you kindly introduce yourself and your title, starting off with you, Secretary of State?

Gavin Williamson: Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education.

Susan Acland-Hood: I am Susan Acland-Hood, and I am the acting permanent secretary in the Department for Education.

Michelle Dyson: I am Michelle Dyson. I am the Director of Qualifications, Curriculum and Extra-Curricular in the Department for Education.

Q131 **Chair:** Thank you. We know that you have been very passionate about getting kids back to school and children learning again—something I strongly support, as no doubt do colleagues on the Committee. We also know that the papers today are reporting that 339 schools are either closed or partially closed. What message can you give teachers, support staff, parents and pupils that there will be a fast testing and track-and-tracing mechanism in schools so that you can reassure everybody who is in education?

Gavin Williamson: Like you, Mr Chairman, we have a shared passion to ensure that all children get back into education. We have seen 99.9% of schools opening and welcoming children back. We have always been conscious that with children coming back into schools, there is going to be a situation where people would need more access to testing. That is why we ensured the delivery of tests to every single school in England. That is why, this morning, we opened up the ordering system for schools to be able to order new tests—for them to be able to get those directly from the NHS so they are able to order supplies. It should be noted that the support that we are putting towards education is something that is quite unique, with schools being able to pull that supply directly from the NHS.

Just this week, I met Baroness Harding from Test and Trace and the NHS, and she highlighted some of the concerns that schools have had about the turnaround to ensure that teachers are able to get tested as swiftly as possible and to be in a position to be back teaching at the earliest possible stage.

Q132 **Chair:** Can you give a testing guarantee, whereby, if there is a suspected outbreak, whether it is a staff member, child or parent, they could get some kind of testing within 48 hours and they do not have to travel a long distance to get that?



Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, as you are aware and your Committee is aware, schools are the only organisations that have sets of testing kits that have been sent to them directly to ensure that if someone is not in a position to be able to get a test, they have testing kits on-site to access. That is something that is quite unique, but very important. As I say, we opened up the order line as of 8 o'clock this morning—or the Department for Health has—for schools to be able to reorder.

The reason I had my meeting with Baroness Harding, as you can imagine, is to continue to emphasise the importance and the priority that we have to put on all our schools and education settings in terms of how vital it is that we always ensure that there is swift testing available.

Q133 **Chair:** You will be aware that schools are expressing that they cannot get hold of tests for their staff or that staff are being told to travel long distances, and that is one of the reasons why they are saying some schools are closing.

Gavin Williamson: This is why we are always working very much with Test and Trace to make sure that they have capacity available for both teachers and pupils. This is also why we ensured that all schools had a set of tests if they were needed. I just want to emphasise that only people with symptoms should be doing the test. If a child and their contacts have been sent home, it is not that all the children that are sent home should be getting the test; it is only the child that is displaying symptoms, as against the whole cohort.

The reason why NHS England are looking at continuing to build the capacity—we have some of the largest capacity in terms of testing of any country around the world; certainly one of the largest—is that there is a recognition that that needs to continue to grow. That is why the Health Secretary has outlined his commitment to growing that to half a million daily tests by the end of October, because we recognise that it is not just schools that continue to place a demand on testing, but all aspects of society.

Q134 **Chair:** We are going to move on to the main subject of the day, which is the exams and Ofqual. On 12 August, the Department announced the triple lock policy, which included the valid mock exam as an appeal route. Ofqual advised you that they could not be confident that this would result in trustworthy grades. That is what they told us a week or so ago. Why did you instruct them to proceed anyway?

Gavin Williamson: We had had many conversations with Ofqual over this period, and at every stage we wanted to ensure there was a maximum amount of fairness in the system for students. We all recognise what exceptional and unprecedented times we are living in. We wanted to do everything we could to ensure that youngsters were in the best possible position and to ensure that, if there was any potential unfairness, or if a child had not got the grade they truly deserved, there was a system that was as open and generous as possible. Ofqual worked



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exceptionally hard and was in a position to be able to produce guidance as to how that could be implemented.

Q135 **Chair:** The day before the exam results, in terms of the announcement of the widening of the appeal system, did you feel then that there may be unfairnesses in the exam grades? Was that why you chose to make that decision?

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, if you go back to 6 August, you see Ofqual issue revisions to their appeals process, because they recognised how important it was to have as robust a process as possible. When we saw what had occurred in Scotland, we wanted to do absolutely everything that we possibly could to ensure that there was maximum fairness for every student who was going to be receiving grades.

Q136 **Chair:** At the time, though, when you did that, you still thought the system was going to be fair?

Gavin Williamson: Yes, absolutely, but there was always a concern that there would be some students that would not have the grades that they truly deserved. That is why, for me, and I believe for all of us, it was incredibly important to ensure that every step was taken so that there was fairness for students.

Q137 **Chair:** If Ofqual were concerned that the idea of the valid mock exam had no real credible meaning, as the chair told the Committee on 2 September, does this not call into question why Ofqual did not challenge the implementation of the policy? In other words, is Ofqual truly independent and do you think that Ofqual is fit for purpose?

Gavin Williamson: Ofqual is most clearly very independent. It was set up to be a non-ministerial Government Department a decade ago, and it has done an incredibly important job in preserving and safeguarding standards. We wanted to do everything we could to ensure fairness. I know that Ofqual, very much at the heart of what it does, wanted to ensure fairness. Without a doubt, any process that you introduce in the midst of a pandemic is going to have its challenges, but Ofqual were in a position where they were going to be able to operationalise a system of appeals that would enable them to take mocks as a key part of that.

Q138 **Chair:** Can you just define the legal relationship between the Department for Education and Ofqual?

Gavin Williamson: The best way of defining it is that, technically, they are more answerable to you than they are to me. I can issue them a direction, but it is not a direction that they have to follow. It is a direction that they should have regard to. They are a proper, independent, standalone non-ministerial Government Department. But, obviously, as you would expect and want, it is right that we have an incredibly good, strong working relationship with it.

Q139 **Chair:** Do you think that they got it wrong, which is why the former chief



executive resigned?

Gavin Williamson: If we go back to mid-March, when we were having to look at closing every single school across the country, they were asked, understandably, to come up with a set of options that was going to be able to lead to awarding of GCSEs, A-levels and other qualifications.

Q140 **Chair:** But my question is, did they get it wrong? Is that why the chief executive resigned?

Gavin Williamson: What they did—this was something that was supported right across the political spectrum—is they came forward with a good and solid set of policies, but the reality, when it came to awarding, was that, fundamentally, the idea of calculated grades was not something that was going to be acceptable and that did work for people.

Q141 **Chair:** What I am asking is, did Ofqual get it wrong, hence the resignation of the chief executive?

Gavin Williamson: The fundamental policy of calculated moderated grades was the right approach to be taking in terms of the exam season. The reality was that there were too many inconsistencies in the grades, and what happened there. That was one of the real challenges, and I think that led to a lack of public confidence in the award of grades.

Q142 **Chair:** In terms of the advice from your senior officials in the Department, did they get it wrong? Obviously, you had the resignation of the permanent secretary.

Gavin Williamson: I think, across the board, if I look at the Labour party—at all political parties—and in all four parts of the United Kingdom, we all reached the same policy decision that calculated and moderated grades was going to be the fairest system to go to. There was considerable concern that if we went purely down—

Chair: We get all that.

Gavin Williamson: We all arrived at a similar—

Q143 **Chair:** Understood, but did you feel that your official advice was not right? Is that why the permanent secretary resigned?

Gavin Williamson: We had all looked very closely at what is the best way to deliver qualifications when you are in a situation where you did not have a set of exams that people were able to take. We had all reached the similar conclusion that this was the best form of doing it, through a calculated or moderated grading system. The reality of that implementation and the awarding was not something that was able to maintain public confidence.

Q144 **Chair:** Presumably you did not have confidence in your officials' advice; otherwise he would not have resigned.

Gavin Williamson: At every stage, Mr Chairman, in this Department, Ofqual and the whole system, there is very broad support for full public



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consultation. In terms of this system and approach, over 12,700 people responded to consultation, 89% of people supported—

Q145 **Chair:** Okay, I understand that, but I am just asking about your officials' advice. You must have been unhappy with it, because the chief executive of Ofqual resigned and the permanent secretary resigned.

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, as you can understand, the decision of the chief regulator—as I said at the time, I am incredibly grateful for her public service, not just as chief regulator, but prior to that—was a decision that she reached with her board. Ofqual's focus, the Department's focus and my focus was making sure that the awarding of the grades was delivered and done and that we had—

Q146 **Chair:** To be clear, in a one-word answer, were you very happy with the advice given to you by your senior officials on all this?

Gavin Williamson: At every stage, I know that the advice and the work that has been done by everyone has had that single, laser-like focus of ensuring that there is as much fairness as possible in the system and that youngsters were in a position to get the grades and the awarding that they needed to be able to progress. That is what drove officials and the ministerial team within the Department for Education. That is what drove Ofqual, and I know that that is what drove the whole sector as well.

Q147 **Chair:** On the Saturday, 15 August, Ofqual published their statement providing an operational definition of the valid mock exam. Within hours, we understand that you phoned Ofqual telling them to retract the statement. Is that correct?

Gavin Williamson: What I always wanted to do was ensure that there was a maximum amount of fairness in the system, and I very much wanted to see any policy properly reflecting—

Q148 **Chair:** Did you call Ofqual and ask them to retract the statement they had put up on their website about the appeal system?

Gavin Williamson: What I was very keen to do was not to change the policy; I was always keen for Ofqual to add to the policy, in the sense that, if the mock result had been higher than the calculated grades, the mock result would have been able to be the thing that—

Q149 **Chair:** Did you approve Ofqual's statement ahead of publication—the one that went up on the Saturday afternoon on the Ofqual website?

Gavin Williamson: We did approve it, but we had always wanted to see if it could be enhanced and improved even further.

Q150 **Chair:** To understand, on the day—I think it was late evening—I received from the DfE a letter that Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister, sent out to schools about the appeal system, which I welcomed because I thought that anything that widened the appeal system was a good thing. That was sent to me from the DfE, and I was told that it had been sent round



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to head teachers—I have a copy of that letter here. What I am trying to understand is what changed between Saturday afternoon and Saturday evening to Sunday, in the sense that that letter was, in essence, a no-no. The statement from Ofqual was taken off its website. What changed between Saturday evening and Sunday, in the sense that you moved to the U-turn?

Gavin Williamson: The key thing that changed is the advice that we received from Ofqual was that the ability for them to be able to deal with the level of changes that would be needed to people's grades was too great to be able to do. Their advice was to move to centre assessment grades on the Sunday.

Q151 **Chair:** Even though on the Saturday afternoon Nick had sent a letter out explaining the welcome widening of the appeals process?

Gavin Williamson: The advice that we received is that, where there were people who were in the position that they had not had a grade that would have been a fair reflection of their work and effort over the course of their studies, an appeal system would be able to address those unfairnesses. What became increasingly clear was that an appeal system, no matter how robust, how wide and how open, was not going to be sufficient in order to be able to address the number of youngsters.

Q152 **Chair:** Right, and that became clear on Saturday night, having sent out something early on that afternoon?

Gavin Williamson: The advice shifted from where we believed that there would be confidence in being able to deal with youngsters who had received a grade that was not a fair reflection, through an appeal system. That sort of shifted, so that, by the Sunday, the advice from Ofqual and the decision of the Ofqual board was that there would be a need to move to centre assessment grades as that would be, in light of everything, the fairest way for students to go forward.

Q153 **Chair:** Did you ask Ofqual to remove the statement off its website?

Gavin Williamson: No.

Q154 **Chair:** No. Having put it up, they took it off entirely independently of you or anyone in the DfE?

Gavin Williamson: We were very keen for them to be able to expand the scope and widen it so that if a valid mock exam had given a higher grade than the centre assessment grades, that could be included. We were keen for that to be included, but I would have hoped that that could ultimately have been done through some form of revision. At every stage, I think everyone—whether it be Ofqual or the Department for Education—was taking the steps to ensure that there was maximum fairness for all youngsters who had either received their grades at A-level or, as we were moving towards GCSE awarding day, to ensure that there was as robust a process as possible so that, where youngsters had not



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got that, they were in a position where, if the grade did not reflect that, they had strong—

Q155 **Chair:** Will the Department publish, or give Ofqual permission to release, the minutes of all relevant meetings, submissions and e-mails between the DfE and Ofqual since 26 March?

Gavin Williamson: As you will know, Mr Chairman, we are very happy to work with you and the Committee on what information is required and needs to be released from the Department and, of course, with Ofqual as well. We have always been very open to doing that. As I said in the House the other week, there is advice that people need to be able to give in a free and frank way and with the confidence and belief that it would always remain confidential, but we are very happy to work with you to ensure that we do the absolute maximum to ensure that as much information as the Committee requires is made available to you.

Q156 **Chair:** Would this include the briefing for the No. 10 Policy Unit staff on 7 August prepared by the DfE with input from Ofqual, for example?

Gavin Williamson: That probably would not be something that would be included, but we are very happy to discuss with your Clerks the range of advice and information that you would require.

Ian Mearns: Good morning, Secretary of State. You will have no doubt seen, or heard about at least, our meeting with Ofqual on 2 September. At that meeting, Julie Swan, who I think is the technical director, revealed in response to a question the existence of an options paper written by Ofqual dated 16 March. The aim was to ensure that students had recognition of learning that they had undertaken and evidence to support progression—that was one of the suggestions within that. When the chair of Ofqual also answered a question, he stated, following the submission of this paper to the Department: “It was the Secretary of State who then subsequently took the decision and announced, without further consultation with Ofqual, that exams were to be cancelled and a system of calculated grades was to be implemented.” I think that was announced also by the Prime Minister in a press briefing. So Ofqual were consulting with the Department, but it was you, Secretary of State, who took the decision. Prior to the summer, this Select Committee had already raised significant concerns about what the potential implications were going to be of cancelling the exams. Is there anything significant that you would have done differently in hindsight?

Gavin Williamson: Ian, you raise a very important question. I think if we were sitting here this time last year, none of us could have made predictions as to the events that would unfold, least of all a global pandemic. Prior to 16 March—a number of weeks before—when we were seeing a situation of rising infections spreading outside of China, South Korea and Japan and becoming a more global issue, and more of a European issue as well, quite understandably we asked Ofqual to look at different options. On 16 March, it provided an options paper, which



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provided the basis of advice. If I recall correctly, there were 11 options outlined there, Ian, and I think that that has been sent over to the Committee.

Q157 Ian Mearns: At one point did it become clear that, by using the algorithm, something like just under 40% of grades would become downgraded? Was that not foreseeable at all, and was there any concern that that would be publicly unacceptable?

Gavin Williamson: On 17 March, to go back to the original question—I appreciate the question that has been thrown in, and I will come to that—we met with Ofqual. It was obviously a very rapidly moving situation. My preference, as I am sure yours is, Ian, is always to have a full form of a managed public examination. That is the best form of assessment that we have available, and that is why we do it in this country. That is completely and understandably Ofqual's position as well. That is exactly what they would want to see. That is where they would always like to be. That was their first option; that was absolutely their preferred option.

Their second option was to delay public exams. The advice we were getting was that the earliest point we would be able to hold exams would be in the September period. This would obviously have quite considerable impacts, because if you are holding exams in September, the impacts on youngsters who had potentially been out of education for a significant period of time would have been significant. The other impact was that if we had held the exams in September, my fear was that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds would have been the ones most likely to end up with no form of qualification whatsoever. They are the ones who would most likely to be in a situation where maybe they had not attended the examination and—*[Inaudible.]*

Then, by 18 March, Sally Collier, the chief regulator of Ofqual, was also making it clear to us that the idea of running an exam season was not something that they thought was going to be viable in light of the pandemic.

Q158 Ian Mearns: Given that the options paper had 11 options, who took the decision to discount the other 10 from the one that was chosen?

Gavin Williamson: As you will see, of the 11 options that were offered, Ofqual felt that there were only three really viable options. Those three viable options were to run with the exam season exactly as planned, but it became apparent that that could not be done; to delay until September, but it was felt that that would halt people's progression; and the final one, which they felt was a viable option—they felt there were only three key options that were truly viable—and that was a calculated grade system. To pick up on what the chairman of Ofqual said, it is important to recognise that there are no easy choices, there were no easy options. He also said—

Chair: Okay, we know that. We have to try to be as concise as possible. I



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am going to bring in Jonathan Gullis now.

Q159 **Ian Mearns:** Sorry, Rob, there is a crucial question from what the Secretary of State just said. For the record, Secretary of State, you said that there was a meeting with Ofqual on 17 March. I do not remember Ofqual mentioning that when they met us on 2 September, so is that categorically what happened?

Gavin Williamson: Absolutely. Maybe if I could bring in Michelle, who is my director. As you can imagine, Ian, there is a considerable amount of discussion. There is ministerial discussion, but, as you will know, there are many different levels and discussions going across the board. Perhaps I could bring in Michelle here to give a bit of a sense of what happened over those few days, which is obviously very important.

Michelle Dyson: Yes, there was a meeting on 17 March with Sally Collier and Michelle Meadows in the room, and that was the critical meeting. There were further conversations the following day with Sally Collier, and the Secretary of State phoned Sally Collier in the afternoon of 18 March before he made his statement to say what the final decision was.

Q160 **Chair:** To clarify, the DfE had no involvement in Ofqual taking down the statement it put up on Saturday, 15 March. Is that right?

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, I very much wanted Ofqual to change that statement to make it wider and more generous, but I very much wanted it to be amended to open that up to make sure that mock exams, if they were higher than the calculated grade—

Q161 **Chair:** So did you speak to them on Saturday 15 August to get them to remove the statement?

Gavin Williamson: I spoke to them to get them to extend the scope and see if that was possible. But I was perfectly happy with the statement, as was the Department, but I did want to see if there was an opportunity to be able to widen it even further, but, ultimately, that is a decision that only Ofqual can take. It is not a decision that I can make as Secretary of State. I certainly, at every stage, wanted to have a system that maximises fairness to the pupils and makes sure that we deliver the best opportunities for all young people.

Chair: I think what is coming from this are blurred lines on accountability and who is responsible for what in terms of Ofqual and the Department for Education. That is why the premise to my question was whether Ofqual is fit for purpose and whether it should just be brought back into the Department for Education.

Q162 **Jonathan Gullis:** I very much share your sentiment, Chair, with understanding who is to blame. I think you said when we spoke to Ofqual on 2 September that "It ain't us, guv" was the tone of their letter.

Secretary of State, would you be able to tell me whether you believe that Ofqual's reputation is now damaged beyond repair with the teaching



profession, parents and students?

Gavin Williamson: If we go back 10 years when we set up Ofqual, that was done absolutely for the very right reasons: making sure that we have independent regulation and a body that is free from political interference in order to be able to safeguard standards for youngsters and safeguard the integrity of the award and examination systems. Ofqual has done a brilliant job at that and has been consistently very good at doing that.

What we both failed to recognise was the fact that we were not in peacetime but in a very different situation in terms of a global pandemic, and we needed to have systems and operations that were able to reflect the fact that we were in a very different situation as we went into that global pandemic. Some of the systems and structures that were historically in place were probably not always best designed for when you are in a global pandemic. We have been having discussions with Ofqual—it has been very useful, and we are very grateful to them—and they are very keen, because we are still in a global pandemic today, to make sure we look at how we operate in a different way.

As you will know, Jonathan, Ministers do not have sight of the data. You get the briefing the day before. More information was shared than usual, but there have always been exceptionally very clear dividing lines between the Department and Ofqual to be able to protect the integrity, which is important.

Q163 **Jonathan Gullis:** Were there any ministerial directions that you wish Ofqual had taken more notice of when you were issuing them?

Gavin Williamson: At every stage we have been dealing with an unprecedented situation. I think we all wanted to see the outcomes incredibly different to where they are. I was glad on 6 August when Ofqual changed their appeals process. I was glad that they took on board the fact that they needed to move on a triple lock, but, fundamentally, the biggest issue was that there were too many youngsters with a grade that did not reflect their efforts. That is why Ofqual ended up in the situation that they did. The challenge always has to be doing everything we can do, and this is why Ofqual ended up in the position that they did in terms of moving to the centre assessment grades, because they realised that there were too many young people with a grade that was not reflective of their performance. That was the right decision.

Q164 **Tom Hunt:** I understand that Ofqual initially wanted to do everything they could for exams to still go ahead. It was briefly spoken about that it might have to be September, and I completely understand the reasons why that would not have been a desirable outcome. I also completely understand why the decision was made to cancel exams and for them not to go ahead. Of course virtually every other country took the same position that we took. But Germany actually went ahead with socially distanced exams. I know that their education system is not exactly the same as ours, but that seemed to go reasonably well in Germany. Again,



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I completely understand why in the midst of the pandemic, when rates of covid were incredibly high, we made that decision—and, of course, most other countries made that decision as well—but, on reflection, looking at the example of Germany, might a lot of this have been avoided if we had gone ahead with socially distanced exams?

Gavin Williamson: I think both you and I are firmly of the view that we should always do exams as against calculated grades in the future, but we were not in a position where we had any level of confidence that we would be able to run those exams. You are right to highlight Germany, and there are significant logistical challenges in Germany, but there are also examples such as the Republic of Ireland, which made the policy decision to run with exams but then had to abandon them. I think what people wanted in March was certainty.

My biggest worry, if we had gone ahead with exams, was that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds—if we had run ahead with exams in June or even in September, when people would have had potentially such a significant gap in learning—would not have completed significant elements of the curriculum and would then have been facing exams. The people who would suffer the most were children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. They are going to be children from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. These were the people I felt, given all the advice—I think a lot of other people also felt this—would be the ones who would be most disadvantaged by running that exam series.

The guidance that we were given is that we could not realistically run those exams until the September. It was something that Ofqual recognised—that a summer series was not going to be a viable option. And looking at the September situation, of course people would not be getting their grades until quite a number of weeks later. The decision felt like the very best one in one of the most difficult and challenging situations I think any of us could imagine ourselves in.

Q165 **Chair:** I think most people have sympathy for the predicament you were in about whether exams went ahead, especially at the height of the lockdown. Going back to the statement that Ofqual put out on 15 August, they said to us in our Committee that they did clear it with the Secretary of State's office.

Gavin Williamson: That is right, and I think they have done an amazing amount of work in a challenging situation at great speed in terms of being able to operationalise that system. I would rather that that set of appeals than no set of appeals process go out. Mr Chairman, I am sorry, but I will probably always be one of those people that continues to push to see if there is a way that we could have maximised fairness for students. Even though there would have been an exceptionally small number of youngsters who would have been in a situation where their mock exam result was higher than the centre assessment grades, I still felt that was the best and fairest thing. I cannot help but want to push for fairness at every single stage.



Q166 **Chair:** Absolutely, but from what they said, they agreed a statement with your Department, then put it up on the website and then you rang them to change it. Is that correct?

Gavin Williamson: What I constantly wanted to push and to do was to go that bit further, and I would have hoped there was a possibility to revise that and open the terms up even a little bit wider. That is of course what I wanted to do. Maybe that is why there was an independent system of regulation that was set up—to stop politicians wanting to push for the most generous settlement.

Q167 **David Simmonds:** Secretary of State, I want to ask you a little about standardisation. It seems so far from the evidence that we have taken that all concerned have acted in good faith, but there is a question about how effectively joined up the approach was. You alluded to, but it would be useful to hear a bit more about, discussions that took place with Scotland and Wales, in particular, about this. It seems that everyone was concerned about the impact on the most disadvantaged students; they had slightly different systems, but everyone still had broadly similar problems with it, which I think leads to two questions.

The first is, in hindsight did the Department have sufficient oversight of how the standardisation process was working? Secondly, given the debate that we have had about disadvantaged students, the chair of Ofqual gave evidence to the Committee that standardisation was better than centre assessment grades for the most disadvantaged students. The U-turn done in Scotland, had it not still allowed for centre assessment grades and locks to be taken into account, would have been worse for the most disadvantaged students than sticking with the standardised process. Do you think there is some learning there that, in fact, we need, particularly in this political context, to have the independence that says standardisation may in some cases be fairer for students, rather than centre assessment grades, which are well known for disadvantaging certain groups?

Gavin Williamson: You had four home nations, which effectively reached broadly the same policy position, even though I think it is fair to say that there are quite different political persuasions across all those four nations. Whether it was John Swinney and the SNP up in Scotland, Kirsty as a Liberal Democrat in a Labour Administration in Wales, Peter as DUP in a Sinn Féin, Alliance and UU Administration in Northern Ireland, we all got to the same position, because we were all incredibly concerned about the youngsters who were going to be most disadvantaged by potentially going through purely teacher-assessed grades. In 2019, 79% of predicted grades were off the final grade, so there were concerns about this.

Given the evidence—we do not see the level of information until that is released by Ofqual on the day and through centres—it became increasingly clear that, while standardisation, as you put it, was done for very much the right reasons, there were clearly some not just individual



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youngsters but also schools and colleges that did not get the right set of grades that were reflective of the work. It was not just a small number of students, but a much more significant and large number of students, which went over and above and beyond what was able to be dealt with by an appeals process.

That is very much what also happened in Wales and Northern Ireland. Despite the best efforts of Ofqual, who tested a large number of different approaches, and despite all that testing and all that rigour, it became obvious there were some flaws in it that meant an appeal system could not deal with this. But the concept of calculated grades in terms of squeezing out any unfairness was a fair and decent approach, but it produced results that were not fair.

Q168 David Simmonds: We heard evidence from Ofqual that they had looked at 11 or 12 different algorithms in respect of England, and clearly the authorities responsible in the other home nations were doing the same thing. We are one nation when it comes to children's access to education, both cross border and the impact on universities. Do you think that, in future, the Department needs to have more oversight of the impact of standardisation, given that it is something that we will continue to use, albeit in not quite the same way as we did this year?

Gavin Williamson: We do need to have those discussions. As I have touched upon, Ofqual have been very much open to the idea of changing their approach and changing how they work with the Department in terms of any form of approach on these matters, because we do recognise that we have to operate differently. There is quite a standard and clear set of lines that are not meant to be crossed in the handling of information and how it is dealt with. Michelle, can I bring you in here?

Michelle Dyson: In a normal year, we get absolutely no information from Ofqual until the Tuesday evening before results come out on a Thursday, and then we work through the night to interpret the results, but all from the point of view of looking at the communication handling of those results, and absolutely not to be able to influence them—they would already have gone to UCAS. It was not that different this year. We did get more information beforehand. Ofqual published some information on 21 July. We had some data right at the end of July to show us the degree of inflation in particular subjects—for example music and German—so that we could think about the impact on universities. We had data that showed what had happened in England vis-à-vis the issue in Scotland—that is, the degree to which there had been downgrading by socioeconomic status. But apart from those two instances, I do not think we had any data before the A-level week itself. That is consistent with how we normally work with Ofqual, but I suppose the thing we now reflect on is, was that a workable way to operate with Ofqual in a pandemic? It reflected previous years, but did it work this year and will it work in the coming year?

Q169 David Simmonds: In Parliament, we have had questions thrown at



Ministers and debated widely, asking whether we could have foreseen that this might have been problematic and whether it is fair. In particular, the charge was levelled that standardisation was significantly disadvantaging children from the lower socioeconomic groups. My understanding of the evidence from Ofqual is that the opposite is the case—that standardisation was to the advantage of those disadvantaged groups. I am concerned, particularly if the data is only coming to the DfE very late in the day, that the communications around this create a very misleading situation that adds to the distress and anxiety of students coming through the system. Maybe the Department needs a greater degree of oversight of what is happening—not necessarily control, but oversight—in order to ensure that the way this is communicated continues to command public confidence.

Gavin Williamson: David, I agree with you on that. If I can refer you back to the correspondence I sent on 31 March to Ofqual, setting out our policy intention, one of the key elements was to ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds, children from ethnic minority backgrounds, were not in a situation where they were disadvantaged as a result of this method of awarding. That was very much at the heart of Ofqual's approach, to ensure that you did not see disparity or disadvantage as a result of that system.

Q170 **Christian Wakeford:** Thank you for joining us, Secretary of State. I hope this will be a quick question. With regard to the process, you have spoken about groups being disadvantaged and how we were trying to avoid that happening. However, one group has been particularly disadvantaged and remains so, and that is those final year students going through home education. What consideration did either the Department or Ofqual give to those particular cohorts? They are the ones who seem to have fallen through all the cracks and are now suffering from not being able to go to university or on to the next level of education this year, through no fault of their own.

Gavin Williamson: You are right to highlight them and the difficulty we had. There was not a policy fix that would have been able to provide an easy answer for those youngsters. The only route that we could see that we could use to help was to ensure that we had an autumn series of exams. This is something that is only taking place in England and nowhere else in the United Kingdom, but that was the only realistic, sensible policy fix that we felt we could bring forward. That was one of the influencing factors as to why we did do that autumn series—so that those youngsters would still be able to get an award. I do appreciate that that comes later, but there has not been a simple or easy solution, or even a complex solution, that would provide a route for that type of awarding.

Q171 **David Johnston:** Secretary of State, most people were pleased with the return to centre assessment grades, but there is a group of parents and young people who are still pretty frustrated by them, because they might have been given a particular predicted grade by their school, which was



then lowered because Ofqual felt that it needed to be in line with historical results. Those parents and young people may now feel in a hugely disqualified and unjust position where they have been given grades that they feel do not reflect their potential and they cannot appeal them because it is not technically an administrative error. What are your thoughts for that group?

Gavin Williamson: We recognise that, where you have centre assessment grades, there will always be those youngsters who feel that that grade is not reflective of their work. This is why we reached the conclusion that it was important to have a form of examination put in place at the earliest possible moment, and, realistically, that was the autumn series. We felt that that was the best form of appeal. The ability to do that was always going to have their costs covered—there would be no cost to the school, the college or the students. Effectively, this is the ultimate arbiter and the ultimate appeals process that we were able to offer. That is what drove the policy decision.

Q172 **David Johnston:** I can see that, although, obviously, by the time they do that, they perhaps cannot go on to do some of the things they were planning to do. The big problem here is that people are saying some schools were very strict at putting grades in line with historical data and others were not, and that is what they feel is the unfairness, if they were at one of the schools that was very strict. Do you feel a school could appeal to Ofqual if it feels in retrospect that it was overly strict because it felt it had been encouraged to be so?

Gavin Williamson: That is not a route that we could realistically go down. Maybe I am being a bit too cynical, David, but I think you would find that every school would decide that it had been too strict on their centre assessment grades and that you would have every school submitting again. The reason that we had gone down the route of calculated grades was to do everything we could to eliminate unfairness and variances that may emerge, but I am afraid that I don't think, from a policy point of view, that it is realistic to open it up for schools to start resubmitting all their calculated grades.

Q173 **Jonathan Gullis:** Secretary of State, I want to check with you, because I asked Ofqual, when you saw what happened in Scotland, albeit that they used a slightly different system, what action did you and the DfE take with Ofqual to prepare and double-check what the results were going to be in a week's time?

Gavin Williamson: When we saw what happened, one of the key areas of debate was the downgrading of children from the most socially deprived areas—much more significant downgrades for those children compared to those children from more affluent socioeconomic areas. One of the key things that we worked very closely with Ofqual on, and put an awful lot of challenge on, was that that was not something that would be repeated. Ofqual was already in the process of taking measures in terms of the enhanced appeal system and changes to that appeal system. That



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was implemented on 6 August. Then we announced the triple lock policy on 12 August. That was very much in line with doing everything we could to ensure that there was maximum fairness in the system.

We had consistent reassurances that some of the unusual nature of results that had occurred in Scotland, and especially the downgrading of youngsters from the most disadvantaged areas, was not something that was going to be common in England, and I think that was similar to the reassurance given in Wales and Northern Ireland. It was important that we had a broadly similar approach for England, Wales and Northern Ireland because we have the common awarding of GCSEs, A-levels and AS-levels across all three.

Q174 **Ian Mearns:** I am listening very carefully to all of this, Secretary of State, and there is a problem swirling round in the back of my mind. That is that you, your predecessors and your Schools Minister are constantly telling us, in Parliament and in the country, that we have more children being educated in good and outstanding schools than ever before, that we have the most professional teaching profession that we have ever had, and yet we are not expected to have, year on year, any significant level of what is classified as grade inflation. It seems to me that a large part of this mess has come about because there was a sort of prime directive that whatever we did, we had to avoid grade inflation in the process. As a result, we have a situation where some schools feel that they have played by the rules and submitted what they think are accurate centre assessment grades based on the historical data that they had to adhere to but that others did not. It is such a mess.

Chair: What is the question?

Ian Mearns: Why aren't we allowed to have grade inflation if we have more children in good and outstanding schools than ever before and a more professional teaching profession than ever before? Shouldn't it be an inherently improving system?

Gavin Williamson: Ian, thank you for your question. I am proud, like my predecessors, and I know you are too, of the progress that schools and the teaching profession have made, not just over the last 10 years but over many decades in what they offer all our children.

We do allow grade inflation. We saw grade inflation in the calculated grades. We saw more youngsters achieving As and A*s. We have seen more youngsters achieving 9s and 8s than before. If we go back to my correspondence and direction letter of 31 March, it rightly highlighted the importance of children from disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds, and the importance of standards. But within that we saw grade inflation with the calculated grades. Actually, we also saw that, without any form of correspondence coming from me, Ofqual were able to move into a position of even more substantial grade inflation going into the system than would usually be the case. So grade inflation was allowed. You saw that from the initial awarding, and then when the



grades were reissued, and from the fact that there was nothing further that had to come from me in order to give them the clearance to do that.

Q175 Ian Mearns: There is a significant concern, particularly among those head teachers who honestly and professionally feel that they and their school played by the rules, and, possibly, by others, because of that inherent grade inflation that was seen in the centre assessment grades. What can we do to compensate the youngsters in those schools where the head teachers fundamentally believe that they played by the rules and submitted their own moderated grades to Ofqual?

Gavin Williamson: This is why it was important that we said we expect all schools to play by the rules and to behave in a proper and honourable manner. That is why we said, "Calculated grades or centre assessment grades, whichever is highest." We thought that was important. Some 3% of youngsters had their grades increased as a result of calculated grades, so we wanted to ensure that those stood. This really comes down to the core of it: what is the best and fairest form of assessment? The best and fairest form of assessment is a proper form of examination that youngsters are able to take in controlled conditions, and that is why it is important that we get back to that position at the earliest possible moment.

Q176 Chair: What did you do when you had the warnings from Sir Jon Coles, even from our Select Committee report, and from others worried about the algorithm way in advance of it being published?

Gavin Williamson: You mentioned Sir Jon Coles. Sir Jon wrote to me. I know he had been making representations to Ofqual. I sat down with Sir Jon and listened to his concerns. Following that, Minister Gibb also sat down with Sir Jon. Following that, he had an emergency meeting with Ofqual over the concerns—

Q177 Chair: Did you ask Ofqual to make changes, or not?

Gavin Williamson: In terms of those meetings, and the consideration of the report of the Education Select Committee, that was very much what drove the changes to the appeals process on 6 August—listening to those concerns and making sure that they were properly taken on board.

Q178 Apsana Begum: I have a few questions about some of those ongoing concerns. First, I want to find out your views about the lack of topic level optionality in the majority of GCSE subjects and all A-level subjects and concerns that that would lead to greater inequality and undermine the credibility and validity of results next summer. It would be helpful to know your thoughts on that, Secretary of State.

I know we are going to come on to this a bit later, but what are your thoughts on the lack of preparation as a result of local and national lockdowns under the current proposals and on the feeling that there is not a huge amount of preparation for a planned system of moderated CAGs, should exams be suspended nationally or locally again next year?



Government seem to be ploughing ahead with league tables or, as Government call them, performance tables, in 2021. The associated pressures and impacts that this would create for schools, colleges and students when it comes to exams are going to be quite immense, I should think. I want to know why Government is ploughing ahead with that. Do you have any views on that that you could share with us?

Gavin Williamson: Of course. Thank you ever so much. You are right to highlight that there will be many communities that are experiencing tighter restrictions than others on movement, but this is why, at every stage, very much the last things to be closing are our schools. We realise how important it is that we do everything we can to ensure children continue to get the education they deserve. This is also why, back on 2 July, as part of the guidance that we issued, we talked about the importance of continuity of education. In what we would hope would be a very small number of areas, and hopefully no areas at all, where the running of education is impacted as a result of covid, it is important to ensure that there is a continuity of education provided by schools.

That is why we are investing the extra money in even more laptops to make sure that schools that have children from a disadvantaged background who may not have resources at home are able to call on a stock so that those children are able to continue their education at home. This is why we have continued to make the investments that we have in the Oak National Academy, to ensure that a continuity of education is provided. We will continue to work with the whole sector to put in as much resource as is needed to help it to deliver continuity of education.

The broader pressures that schools face are something I am incredibly conscious of. We realise that we are asking schools, teachers, teaching assistants and all the support staff to make a heroic effort in opening up and welcoming back millions of children. That is why, as Ofsted starts to do visits, it is not doing inspection visits. This is why we are continuing to work with the sector to make sure that we are not putting added and undue pressures on it and that it can be focusing on the job in hand.

But it is important that we start to look towards the future as to how we ensure that measures of accountability are returned and that these are sympathetic and empathetic with the challenges that the sector is currently facing.

Q179 **Apsana Begum:** I feel that there is a lack of understanding shown by suggestions that, for example, A-level students will not need topic level optionality, simply because they are older or possibly more motivated.

Open book elements of exams such as having access to formula sheets in science exams or poetry anthologies in English literature exams, and so forth, have been dismissed out of hand. Students who are already entering GCSE, AS or A-level exams are being unreasonably expected to cover the full course, when, obviously through no fault of their own or of their school or college, they have not had access to the amount of



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learning that would have allowed them to have done, so they are already in a disadvantaged place as it is. Are you aware of these kinds of limitations of the current proposals?

Gavin Williamson: This is why we are continuing to work with Ofqual and the exam boards, as well as the broader sector, to make sure that we put in place as much support as possible to ensure that children going into the 2021 exam series, whether that is at GCSE, A-level or AS Level, are not in a position where they are disadvantaged. I know this is something that the whole sector, and Ofqual, is incredibly aware of. That is why we will continue to work with them to make sure that we have a set of policy options that do the absolute maximum to ensure that youngsters, wherever they are from, are not disadvantaged.

Q180 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Secretary of State. I think we can all agree that the exam grading process over the summer was a complete fiasco. The use of predicted grades is a major barrier for black students, as these students disproportionately receive grades that do not reflect their final achievements, making it harder for them to gain entry into higher tariff universities. Many are forced to defer their place this year. Can you give any assurance that additional funding will be allocated to universities next year to allow them to offer places to all those who met the criteria?

Secondly, can you explain what advice your previous permanent secretary gave you over the directions that you took and why the Prime Minister felt there was a need for fresh official leadership in the Department?

Gavin Williamson: Kim, I am not sure: are you in favour of calculated grades or in favour of centre assessment grades? That was not quite clear from the question. I was not sure if you were against both or in favour of both.

Kim Johnson: Centre. The first one.

Gavin Williamson: You are in favour of calculated grades—the process that we went down.

Kim Johnson: No.

Gavin Williamson: Okay, so are you in favour of centre assessment grades?

Kim Johnson: Yes.

Gavin Williamson: But then you also said that they disadvantage children from—

Kim Johnson: We, as a Committee, provided advice and guidance about how we felt that some students were going to be unfairly affected by the route that you took.



Gavin Williamson: But that is why we had gone down the calculated grades route, because we were concerned that youngsters from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, from ethnic minority backgrounds. Historically, most studies that have been carried out found that these youngsters, through, effectively, predicted grades or centre assessment grades, were the ones that were most impacted, and that is one of the key reasons why we had gone down the calculated grades route. I am not quite sure what you are making an argument for—whether you are making an argument for a calculated grade system that is maybe done slightly differently, or whether you are arguing for centre assessment grades.

But maybe we can put that to one side. That is why we had gone down the route of calculated grades, because of your concerns. The exact concerns that you had were the same concerns that we had about those youngsters from deprived backgrounds and children from BAME backgrounds as well, because the studies had steered us to that route. That is why it was important that we had the calculated grade, so that if they were higher than the predicted grade from those centres, those were the grades that still stood. Historical analysis had always shown that children from those backgrounds were the ones who suffered more, so that is why we could not just flip straight to a centre assessment grades. It was important that those calculated grades still stood, because there were a lot of youngsters from those backgrounds who were maybe going to be disadvantaged.

The Ofqual qualification that was run earlier on in the year was backed by all the unions because they had exactly the same concerns as you and I had. It was the reason why the deputy leader of the Labour party, then shadow Education Secretary, claimed as a great victory the fact that we were moving to calculated grades, because Labour felt it was the right system. And it why probably all four nations of the United Kingdom ended up with a very similar policy decision—because the concerns you have were concerns we have.

Moving on to the issue you flag with the universities, we are already working with the sector to make sure that we maximise capacity for youngsters who want to go to university. We saw swift action being taken this year, removing the caps on medical, dentistry and veterinary places, making sure that there is as much capacity there as possible. We are already working with the sector to make sure that we are in the best possible place for all youngsters, whatever their backgrounds, to be able to take advantage of our brilliant higher education institutions next year as well. But I very much take on board your point and your request. I got the impression you were almost going into a spending review bid.

Q181 **Kim Johnson:** No. Going back to the centre assessment grades, they were standardised to reflect past performance of schools, which does not allow for high-performing individual students from black backgrounds or low-income backgrounds. The exclusion is further entrenched by



underlying assumptions. The decision was taken not to allow appeals by affected pupils against a whole school's CAG. Why was it taken, and who took it?

Gavin Williamson: You have calculated grades and centre assessment grades that are both there in terms of whichever is highest. Ofqual tested the impact on the algorithm, on different centre types, with different proportions of candidates from different backgrounds and socioeconomic status. With the calculated grades, again, it was felt that youngsters from those backgrounds were not disadvantaged.

In terms of the appeals process that we put in place, we have, effectively, moved to the system that is of the absolute maximum generosity in terms of whichever is highest, calculated grades or centre assessment grades. When we look at university admissions and capacity next year, we have already allocated additional teaching grant funding to be provided to increase capacity in medical, nursing, STEM and other high-cost subjects, very much to ensure that youngsters from all backgrounds are not disadvantaged as a result of what has happened this year, and making sure that we add as much capacity as possible into the system. Providers are able to bid up to an extra £10 million-worth of funding to provide that capacity.

Kim Johnson: I think from the answers to those questions that, at the end of the day, young people in those categories are still going to be extremely disaffected by what has happened over the summer. As much as you talk about money being issued, often it does not get to the right people at the right time. Thank you, Secretary of State. Those are all my questions.

Q182 **Jonathan Gullis:** My question is regarding BTECs, which appear to have been a secondary thought in this process. What oversight has the Department had regarding the situation of the BTEC results and the 450,000 whose results were delayed?

Gavin Williamson: Jonathan, can I absolutely assure you that our technical and vocational qualifications are very much ingrained on my heart. BTECs are incredibly important to us, as is the roll-out of our T-levels, which we are also seeing this month.

There is a slightly different approach to the regulation of BTECs and awarding bodies. What was clear was that there had to be the same level of fairness in the awarding of technical and vocational qualifications, including BTECs, as had been the case in GCSEs and A and AS-levels. It became clear to us that when Pearson said that they had to change some of the grading in BTECS, they would not be able to hit that Thursday deadline that we wanted them to do—

Q183 **Jonathan Gullis:** Sorry, very quickly on that point, the big issue that has come to me from exam officers—I know that you thanked them for all their hard work—is that the day before results were announced, at 5.00 pm, Pearson sent out the e-mail basically saying that there was going to



be a delay. Do you not agree that that was really shoddy from Pearson? To be quite frank, a lot of hard work to print the results suddenly was lost in some schools, or they were going to have to print a whole new notice to put in with the results to say, "Please ignore the BTEC results." I went to a few schools on results day, and it was a fiasco, with students being told, "This is the grade we think you are going to get, but please ignore it because it might not end up being that one." It was really shoddy, especially for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds in areas like Stoke-on-Trent where BTECs have much higher take-up than in other parts of the country. It meant that a lot of students were not able to progress to the next stage.

Chair: As an aside to that, what I did not understand was that, on the day when there was the change in policy, Ofqual said one line about BTECs, saying they would not be affected, when it was clear that there was going to have to be some kind of change. There were 450,000 students who appeared to be forgotten about—not by you, and I know you care very deeply about this issue and about technical qualifications, so I am not laying this at your door, but I felt that, given the way BTECs were treated, they came over as a forgotten part of our education system.

Gavin Williamson: Certainly when I had my discussions with Pearson earlier on in the week, there was no sense that this would be a problem. Perhaps I could bring in Michelle on this point. Michelle, could you comment on the situation that we ended up finding ourselves in?

Michelle Dyson: My understanding from Pearson's point of view was that they did not originally think that they needed to make changes on the back of the changes that we made to some A-levels and GCSEs, but when they looked at it more closely, they thought that the processes that they had been through would not stand up to public confidence and, therefore, they changed their position—I think it was on the Wednesday, and they told us that afternoon.

Gavin Williamson: We are not in a position where we can tell Pearson what to do in whichever sort of way on this, but it goes without saying that our preferred option would have been that BTECs and GCSEs were released on the same day. But if there was a situation where youngsters would potentially have had a higher grade as a result of changes that Pearson would have made, it was equally right that those youngsters should get the benefit of that higher grade rather than not getting it.

Q184 **Chair:** It was clear there was going to be some kind of domino effect. The statement from Ofqual about BTECs on the day perhaps should have been slightly different.

Gavin Williamson: I think that is a very valid point, and it was something that was highlighted to Pearson on the Wednesday that it decided to take that action.

Q185 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Secretary of State, I would like to ask you a



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couple of questions, first about next year's exams. Students, particularly those sitting GCSEs, A-levels or BTECs next year, are very worried about whether the same thing that happened this year is going to happen to them and they would like some reassurance. You published some changes to the curriculum of some exams in some subjects. Can you reassure students that those changes are final, that what they are now being asked to study will be what they are examined on in eight months' time and that the curriculum will not change in the meantime?

Gavin Williamson: Certainly we have no plans for major curriculum change, which will be a relief, I am sure, for you and for children, parents and the whole education sector.

We can continue to work with Ofqual on some of the challenges, and Ofqual did an extensive consultation on 2 July on the different changes that they were looking at. We are also continuing to do quite a substantial body of work to make sure that the lessons that come out of the awarding this year are properly learnt and that any changes that we need to make to ensure maximum fairness for youngsters are undertaken.

Can I beg your leave, Mr Chairman, to bring in Susan, who is our acting permanent secretary at the Department, and who is leading a body of work dealing with some of these issues? We are so incredibly conscious of how important it is that youngsters going into 2021 are in the very best possible position to succeed, because in many respects they are the ones who will have suffered the maximum amount of disruption.

Chair: No problem

Susan Acland-Hood: I will try to be brief. What I have tried to do since arriving in the Department is to set up a piece of work looking at the students who will take exams in 2021, trying to bring together not just the work on awarding and qualifications, but also making sure we are being very attentive to those students in thinking about lost learning, and about how we are supporting schools to help them to catch up and making sure that we have also thought about their progression in the work that we do with universities and other destinations. I am keen that we do that work in the round and look into all the aspects of the experiences those students will have, because members of the Committee will be hearing—I am also hearing, and the Secretary of State is hearing—from those students and their parents about their anxieties.

We have put a very firm stake in the ground. Just as we have said we will do everything we can to make it a national priority to keep our schools, colleges and other places of learning open as far as we possibly can through this pandemic, we will do our absolute utmost to make sure that exams take place effectively next summer. We are putting everything we can think of in place around that to make sure that we can keep going and make those exams go ahead successfully.



Q186 Dr Caroline Johnson: It is great to hear that you are looking so closely at this group. It is about eight months until they are due to sit the exams, and there have been some published changes to books that may be read in English literature and the topics that may be chosen in history. What I am trying to get clarity about is whether those changes are the final changes? Can students now throw themselves into eight months of learning that set of topics without worrying that they will be changed?

Gavin Williamson: They can very much throw themselves into it.

Q187 Dr Caroline Johnson: Thank you, Secretary of State. That is really helpful.

Permanent secretary, you talked about the dates. Could the Secretary of State talk us through what he is thinking about with regard to the dates of the exams? To my mind, it would seem sensible to make the exams slightly later, as far as possible, to give students who have lost learning time extra time to catch up in school. Have you given any consideration to that? What plans do you have in place to ensure that more people to mark the exams could be recruited in time for next summer so that the exams could be marked quickly, despite being delayed, and in time for the UCAS session?

Gavin Williamson: We are very much having that active consideration discussion. On 2 July, Ofqual consulted—I think it was page 15 of its consultation document—about the idea of moving exams back to maximise learning time. We equally have the challenge that it does limit the shift that you can make if we want people to be able to progress on to university or college, but it is something that we are actively considering. I would love to share some details with you now, Caroline, but I am not quite in a position to do that, because we do not see it as just a single and sole thing that is needed to help. It would be part of something much more in the round, but we are very actively looking at that and leaning towards how we can maximise the time youngsters can learn, but in a thoughtful and limited manner.

Q188 Dr Caroline Johnson: My final question is in relation to the timing of next year's exams. Some students will no doubt be concerned that they would be subject to track and trace or be unwell and having to isolate to protect the rest of the public on the date of their specific exam in their specific subject. Ofqual spoke to us about having two sessions of equally rigorous exams, or perhaps more. Also, the normal spacing of desks is 1.25 metres, as I understand it, and we would probably want people to be further apart and would, therefore, need more halls and more invigilators to achieve that. Do you have plans in place to deal with that? You have time at the moment to do so.

Gavin Williamson: We are very much looking at that and very much taking on board what Ofqual has said about maybe needing to have a reserve set of papers for youngsters who, as you have highlighted, may not be in a position to take that examination—obviously, it wouldn't be possible for them to take the same examination just a few weeks later.



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We are very aware of that. We are very conscious of that, and we are planning for that. We are also planning for the fact that there may need to be a different approach in terms of creating extra capacity within schools and a wider use of public buildings for exam centres, if that is required in local communities as a result of further social distancing.

Q189 Dr Caroline Johnson: When do you expect to be able to update the Committee, and indeed the students and the teachers who will be organising these exams, with the final information?

Gavin Williamson: It will be in the very near future, Caroline.

Q190 David Simmonds: This is a logistical question. One of the pieces of evidence from Ofqual was that the advice it had given about exams had gone initially to the Department of Health and Social Care. Are you confident that the DfE is in control of all the different pieces of advice going into Government and that we are not going to see a decision made in another Government Department, in the light of advice that it has received, negatively impacting on decisions that are very much within the domains of the DfE?

Gavin Williamson: David, you highlight the challenge that, when you are dealing with the situation that we are, we have to take consideration and proper regard of the views of other Departments. Obviously, in a global pandemic, you are in a situation where what the Department of Health, and what was Public Health England, think are important measures to control the pandemic become clear and overriding considerations for part of what you are doing in terms of delivery, but this is very much aimed to be done in a joined-up manner. I equally think we would face quite a lot of considerable criticism, probably not just from the Committee but more widely, if we were not taking those health considerations on board. I have every confidence that the decisions we make will be very much focused on delivering the best educational outcomes and fairness for students, but I believe that can be done while also taking on board the considerations, concerns and requirements of other Departments—notably the Department of Health, especially when we are in this pandemic situation.

Q191 Tom Hunt: I think it is about providing that 100% certainty to schools and pupils as soon as possible that, come what may, exams will go ahead. I would want us to go a bit further than we are today, and I am glad that soon, hopefully, you will be able to communicate that.

I think you are in a pretty good place when it comes to the importance of exams, but I think it is just worth stressing that, because I have seen some people try to use this as a bit of an opportunity to push back against the importance of exams. Somehow, it has been communicated that exams are these really nasty things. I get that many pupils get stressed by exams, but I would also like to point out that, for many people, they work, and particularly, often, for unconventional learners. Lots of dyslexic and dyspraxic pupils actually really welcome exams



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because they do things in their own way. If there is this pushback against exams and people are saying this is an opportunity to review the role of exams and so on, I hope that you will be robust in pushing back against that and bear in mind that many SEND pupils prefer exams. I know each pupil is different, but will you just bear that in mind?

Gavin Williamson: Tom, I have repeatedly said in the House of Commons that we are going ahead with exams next year. Sadly, sometimes if you announce things in the House of Commons not everyone always notices, but we have been very consistent about that.

I think you raised an important point. Some people will try to use this crisis to undo some of the important progress that has been made on the quality and rigour of examinations and the important part that examinations need to play in assessment. What has been clearly evidenced over the last few months is how important exams are and how, although there is no perfect system, exams are far and away better—leagues better—than any other form of system that anyone can come up with. That is why it is so vital and so important that we get exams series up and running for 2021.

Q192 **Jonathan Gullis:** Secretary of State, I want to be sure on one point. Ofqual mentioned as a plan B or plan C the idea of creating some sort of super online testing—a way of doing exams online. Can you alleviate the nightmares I have been having since I heard that and guarantee me that we will not by trying to create some massive online system, which inevitably will completely muck up? As you have already reiterated, exams are the only thing students need to be thinking about for next year.

Gavin Williamson: Very much exams. We will look at making sure that there are back-ups for exams if, hypothetically, it was not feasible to run exams in a particular town or a city. I would like to reassure you that there are not any algorithm plans.

Q193 **Chair:** In the House, I asked the Schools Minister—or it may have been to you—about early assessment of pupils in schools during September to find out how much loss of learning there has been so that you know how delayed the exams need to be and what you need to do to the syllabus. Is that going to happen? I know you have a long-term plan on catch-up, but I am talking specifically about those years and some kind of national assessment to help you determine your decision.

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, you are right to highlight this and the importance of it. We have just concluded a contract to be able to roll this out. It will not be every single pupil, but taking a very large, substantial slice of pupils, and it is not just right at the start of the year, but it will continue through the year so that we can be measuring progression as well.

Q194 **Chair:** Will you be able to do it enough to inform your decision about the timetable of exams next year?



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Gavin Williamson: Very much so. I can bring Susan in on this point, if that is okay, as well. But, yes, we expect to see that informing us on all our decisions.

Chair: The teachers need to know now, especially what parts of the syllabus to teach and so on.

Gavin Williamson: Can I just bring Susan in?

Chair: Yes, I beg your pardon. Susan?

Susan Acland-Hood: I was going to give a little bit more detail on the work we have done. As the Secretary of State has said, we have commissioned an independent research and assessment agency to provide that kind of assessment of the catch-up needs. It will take a sample of pupils from years 1 to 11. It will look across the whole pupil population. It will allow us to understand more about how different groups of pupils have been affected, as well as about the average effects.

We will use that principally for research purposes. We want to be very clear with schools that we are not using it as any form of accountability or assessment for schools, but of course we will also want to use it to inform our decision making.

In terms of informing next summer's exam series, on some of these decisions the priority, as the Committee has emphasised, is to make sure that while we need to make really good and well-informed decisions in order to make sure that we are consulting all the people who need to be part of that, students and parents need to know soon what we are doing. I am not sure how far we will get detailed information from that work before we make decisions about exam timing. That is a decision we know we need to make soon to make sure everyone is suitably prepared for the work that they need to do between now and then.

In a sense, the principle that we want to extend the amount of learning time as much as possible without knocking into the time that is needed for pupils to progress into their next step means the gearing is the same in a sense—you would want to extend the time by as much as you can without messing up what happens across the summer.

Q195 **Chair:** Do you think you will know about the exam timetable by October?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think the Secretary of State said very shortly.

Chair: Yes, but in Whitehall terms that can mean quite a few things.

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, I think very shortly is definitely the month of October.

Chair: Okay. That is good news, I think, and will be welcomed.

Q196 **Ian Mearns:** On the whole situation of exams, we have to remember that Ofqual has previously expressed the view that probably about 25%



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of grades awarded every year are inaccurate, so about 12.5% are too high, about 12.5% are too low, and there is an inherent unfairness within that. Thinking for the long term, Secretary of State and new permanent secretary, what are we going to do about that? Through this process during the summer, we were told that the grades awarded would be reliable, a grade either side, but since Ofqual has already told us that, annually, 25% of grades are probably inaccurate, what are we going to do about that inherent unfairness? We know that some people are more likely to be able to fund an appeal than others.

Gavin Williamson: Ian, at every stage the best way of making sure that you give youngsters the best chance to succeed is to continue to drive our mission of standards and quality within education and within schools in terms of how the curriculum is taught, making sure it is a knowledge-rich curriculum. All of these things will go a long way towards making sure that children can perform the best they possibly can.

Q197 **Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State, that is not about the grade that they are awarded on an exam that they take. Ofqual has admitted that about one quarter of all grades are inaccurate.

Gavin Williamson: In 2019, 79% of predicted grades provided by schools ended up being different from the exam results. What is clear is that the exam system is the fairest and best system available to us.

Q198 **Ian Mearns:** Sorry, Secretary of State, I think you are missing the point. Ofqual has admitted that 25% of the grades awarded, if reassessed by a senior examiner, would be different. In other words, 25% are inaccurate, and it might be up or it might be down. That is an inherently unfair system. Of the 350,000 appeals that are put in every year, about 80% are against grades that are accurate, not against the inaccurate ones, so we have to do something about that. It is inherently unfair.

Gavin Williamson: But Ian, this is why it is important to have a robust appeal system. That is why it is important that schools are able to appeal. Schools know their pupils. If they don't feel something is right, they have the ability to do that, and they can do that whatever a pupil's background is and at no cost to the pupil.

Q199 **Ian Mearns:** I know that you are very interested in fairness, Secretary of State, but in a situation where 25% of grades are assessed to be wrong every year, and only 1% of grades are altered upwards, that is inherently still unfair. That needs a proper review, not only by Ofqual but by yourselves.

Gavin Williamson: This is why Ofqual, every single year, does more and more work with exam boards to ensure there is consistency and fairness of marking. That is the right approach, to make sure that you maximise the fairness in the exam system. I am not quite sure what alternative to having exams you are proposing.

Chair: We will move on now, Ian.



Q200 **Ian Mearns:** Sorry, Rob. The Secretary of State asked me what I am proposing. What I am proposing is to carry on doing exams but have them marked accurately. What I am saying to you is, Ofqual—

Gavin Williamson: We are in exactly the same position, Ian. We will certainly push Ofqual and the exam boards, to make sure there is maximum fairness and maximum consistency. This is why we ended up creating an independent regulator in the early part of the last decade.

Q201 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Secretary of State, when you took the decision to close the schools on 20 March, it was a week or so before the Easter break. But guidance was published for schools, telling them how they might provide online provision or home provision, on Sunday, 19 April, just before they returned to school. Headmasters, headmistresses and all the other teachers worked very hard over the Easter holidays to try to see what they might be able to do to continue to teach the children at home. Do you think the Department performed well in setting clear standards and clear expectations of what remote learning should look like, what progress checks should be made and what wellbeing checks should be made on students that were more vulnerable?

Gavin Williamson: We did a number of quite exceptional things. That includes the fact that when we had the closure of schools to all pupils, we kept them open for children of critical workers, important NHS staff such as yourself and many others. We were also one of the first countries anywhere in the world to keep them open for vulnerable children as well—children who are the most disadvantaged. I think that was a really important step.

I think the guidance we issued for schools in steering them towards making sure they do the maximum amount of provision was the right thing to do. The guidance on 2 July setting even further expectations of what is delivered was also the right thing to do. If we look at innovations such as the Oak National Academy, which has delivered over 16 million lessons in its time of operation, that goes to show that some real innovation has come forward.

We have seen schools do things absolutely brilliantly, but I want to drive up the consistency across the board to make sure all schools are doing an absolute minimum and driving up those standards. That is why it is important that one of the things Ofsted will be assessing as part of its inspections of schools going forward is the provision they made.

Q202 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** The Committee has heard quite a lot about variable provision. They have heard some fantastic things about lessons from the Oak National Academy, for example, and from teachers and schools going very far above and beyond what may have been expected. Sadly, we have also heard that one in five children have done no work or less than an hour per school day. The Children's Commissioner spoke to this Committee about the lack of consistency. Perhaps most worryingly, we heard that 14% of foster carers looking after some of the country's



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most vulnerable children, where those children had not been able to go into school for particular reasons, had not been able to access any work, despite trying with the schools. Do you regret that Ofsted was not more involved in inspections during the pandemic, when other countries have managed to support schools in providing better provision at home?

Gavin Williamson: Caroline, this is why we particularly targeted vulnerable children and have done a lot of work not just with schools but also with social workers and local authorities in getting vulnerable children back into schools. I was very pleased with the attendance data. The attendance at school of children from the most vulnerable backgrounds is broadly in line with children of all other backgrounds. This is why we are bringing back Ofsted visits. We recognise we had to make quite significant changes. Certainly, with schools were closing, it did not seem the right thing to be continuing with Ofsted inspections during the height of the pandemic. But Ofsted has been very closely deployed through REACT teams in working with local authorities and schools. As we move this September to return to the more normal and formal role of Ofsted, I think that that will be the right moment to do this.

Q203 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Out of interest, what percentage of vulnerable children were attending school throughout the pandemic?

Gavin Williamson: I believe that the children who were attending school, on the latest figures, was within plus or minus one of the overall attendance levels. I think we had somewhere in the region of 75,000 vulnerable children who were attending school at the height of the pandemic.

Q204 **Chair:** Wasn't it about 85% that were not attending during the lockdown?

Gavin Williamson: As you will know, Mr Chairman, we created a very wide umbrella for those youngsters that were able to be there and some of those children with very special education needs, where it obviously would not have been suitable to. We had a significantly higher rate of vulnerable children attending school right the way through than in any of the other home nations, and, I believe, any other nation anywhere else in Europe, so we were much more successful in getting vulnerable children into school than anyone else.

Q205 **Chair:** Despite the brilliant efforts of the Oak Academy, there were still over 2 million children who hardly learnt anything at all during the lockdown for of a number of reasons. It is still a huge number of children.

Gavin Williamson: There is a simple reality: we would always expect schools to be teaching all the way through and supporting pupils. We have set out very clearly what those expectations are as schools have had their full return, recognising the fact that we have to deliver a continuity of education for all children, and that is the expectation placed on all schools.

Q206 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Secretary of State, now that children have gone



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back into school and, well done, we have 99.9% of schools reopened, which is fantastic to hear, are you satisfied that, where schools may need to close, at least partially, to certain bubbles or certain year groups of children, the home provision standard will be high across the board and we will not see children again being left without provision, and will Ofsted ensure that schools are inspected accordingly to ensure that is always the case and that parents can rely on it?

Gavin Williamson: Caroline, as I touched on earlier, that is very clearly what Ofsted will be doing in its inspections to ensure the continuity of education has been delivered upon, yes.

Q207 **Kim Johnson:** Secretary of State, following on from previous questions about learning loss and disadvantage, there have been a number of reports by leading institutions about the learning loss that has occurred as a result of lockdown and the greater impact this has had on disadvantaged children and students and on the widening of the attainment gap. The promised funding and resources have not reached those most in need. Can you tell us what the DfE are doing to measure this loss at a student level? How are you working with the regulators to assess what needs to happen as a result of this?

Gavin Williamson: Susan touched upon some of the work that we have already commissioned and that is ongoing in terms of doing that assessment across year groups 1 to 11 to make sure we have a clear understanding. Also, talking with the teaching profession, there is a clear need for teachers, when they have pupils in the class, to be able to make those important assessments on the needs of those children. That is something I know is ongoing, but we have decided to supplement it with a national study so we have a real clear idea as to some of those challenges. That is why we brought forward the £1 billion package, whether that is the national tutoring programme or the covid catch-up fund. So we are targeting a good chunk of that money towards the children in most disadvantage, but we are not forgetting that children of all backgrounds have suffered as a result of not being in full-time education.

Q208 **Kim Johnson:** We have heard from various organisations that the number of vulnerable children has increased significantly throughout this period as a result of coronavirus, whether that is due to parents losing jobs or domestic violence. What assessment has the Department done in calculating the extra number of children and the extra resources required to support those children?

Gavin Williamson: As you can imagine, this has been an unprecedented time for children of all backgrounds, and we are seeing higher referrals than would historically be the case. We are working very closely with local authorities to ensure we keep very close to that and that resources that are needed are made available to them.

Q209 **Kim Johnson:** Can you clarify how closely you are working and what role



you are playing with local authorities to support those needs?

Gavin Williamson: Absolutely hand in glove. We have not come out of a global pandemic in recent times, so everything we are learning from this we are learning for the first time. The issue of children in social care is incredibly important to the Department, and I have no doubt you will have Minister Ford in front of you, who has been working very closely not only with representative bodies of local authorities but also with local authorities themselves in tackling some of the issues that will inevitably emerge given the fact we are in a pandemic.

This is a bit of a hobby-horse of mine, but it is very easy to focus on some of the negatives that come out of extraordinarily difficult situations. One of the real positives we have seen is the much closer working that has emerged between schools, social workers, local authorities and the police, and you have seen quite a transformation in a lot of local areas. One of the things I would love to see more of is more social workers being based in schools, because it makes their job easier. I think it removes some of the stigma of going to social workers to ask for support. We have been supporting local authorities to the tune of £3.7 billion. In my constituency, I know how important that extra funding has been to local authorities for them to be able to deliver the extra services and extra support required from communities when we are all dealing with such a unique set of circumstances.

Kim Johnson: That funding is great, but after 10 years of austerity it hardly touches the surface, and more funding is required to local authorities to meet the needs going forward.

Chair: Can I ask colleagues to try to rattle through the next section? Jonathan Gullis, you are next on the catch-up premium. Can you be as concise as possible?

Q210 **Jonathan Gullis:** Thank you, Chair. Secretary of State, the DfE announcement that the national tutoring programme is going to have only tutoring companies that have worked with schools means that we are talking about 2% to 5% of actual tuition companies being able to engage with schools, because 95% to 98% of the profession work in a private capacity. How is that going to help disadvantaged kids with catching up? What confidence do you have that the tutors themselves are sufficiently trained to take up the role in the autumn to help those students in more deprived places like Stoke-on-Trent?

Gavin Williamson: It is a really important part of this. We are working very closely with the Education Endowment Foundation who have very much pioneered this policy, which is very much targeted at closing the gap of learning loss, especially for the youngsters from the most deprived areas. I take on board your point on the private tutors, and I will take that up with the policy officials to see if there is more that can be done to add and build capacity. One of the key elements that we want to ensure is the case at every stage is that the quality of what is being done is high.



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That is one aspect of the tutoring programme that is very important, but in terms of the broader covid catch-up fund, we wanted to put more flexibility and clear guidance in there. You see some brilliant examples, whether it is Harris, who are running Saturday schools, or the many other organisations—I was with AET, who are delivering online specialist tuition that has been made possible by this extra money.

Chair: Can you rattle through answers as well? It is in your interests, Secretary of State.

Q211 **Jonathan Gullis:** Given that school closures were widely expected, to widen the disadvantage gap, what was the rationale behind the Government's decision to provide its £650 million catch-up premium on a universal basis to all schools?

Gavin Williamson: Largely because every child has suffered a disadvantage as a result of not being in school. Drawing a circle around one group of children and saying they are the only ones who have been disadvantaged was not going to be possible. The reason, on a pro rata basis, it was more targeted at children who are most disadvantaged was that we recognise they probably suffered the greatest disadvantage, but we should not underestimate the fact that all pupils have suffered as a result of not having full-time education.

Q212 **Jonathan Gullis:** Are you confident you will have enough tutors to deliver the scheme all over the country?

Gavin Williamson: We are working very closely with EEF to ensure that is the case and working with lots of organisations to ensure this can be done. We believe the creation of academic mentors for the most disadvantaged could have real, long-lasting, positive effects. It is a bold step, but I think it is the right step, partly inspired by the Chairman of this Committee.

Q213 **Ian Mearns:** I am interested in the detail of how you are going to make sure the tutors are in the right parts of the country, where they are most needed, first and foremost, Secretary of State. Given that school closures were widely expected to widen the disadvantage gap, what is the rationale behind spreading the additional money across all schools? Surely it should be targeted to where it is literally most needed.

Gavin Williamson: We recognise a lot of this small group tuition will be delivered online, and that will help smooth some of the challenges there. But if I can refer you back to how I responded to Jonathan's question, I think that probably picks up the points on why we made the decision about targeting a much bigger proportion of that money towards children who are most disadvantaged, not forgetting that children who are disadvantaged get the double benefit of not just targeted tuition funding but also the overall extra spending on catch-up as well.

Q214 **Ian Mearns:** Yes, but an awful lot of the youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds have not yet had the benefit of the promised connectivity in



terms of IT equipment, or the IT equipment itself. Quite often in disadvantaged families, even if they have a computer, if there are two or three children, they do not have access to the computer all the time when they need it. We will have to think about that. I would guess that, because of the range of private tuition available, that will be very different in different parts of the country. I would guess that, in the north-east of England, in Merseyside or in Greater Manchester, there are many fewer private tutors per thousand of population than there are possibly in the home counties.

Gavin Williamson: That is why being able to deliver through the web is incredibly important, but also all schools will have resources in terms computers. There is a real benefit in doing some of that small group working within the school environment, where there is a lot more resource and support readily available.

Q215 **Christian Wakeford:** Ian touched briefly on laptops. While it was very helpful to get those, I have heard much more was probably needed. There was also very little point in having a laptop if there was no connection at home to maximise the use of the laptop. What lessons have we learnt from that perspective?

Caroline touched briefly on the 2 million children who had very little education during lockdown. My fear is that we are going to repeat that when we have local restrictions or local flare-ups. I have about 600 children in Bury who are not in education at the moment because of spikes or cases in their schools. A constant issue in the original lockdown was that there was a lack of guidance from the Department on what online learning could be given. What steps are being taken moving forward to make sure that maximum guidance is given so that we provide not just the bare minimum but a truly fully rounded education for all children?

Gavin Williamson: Christian, often one of the criticisms is that we put out too much guidance, but we are continuing to supplement the guidance in terms of where the expectations are and what will be delivered. We distributed over 200,000 laptops and devices. We also distributed over 50,000 routers to tackle some of the issues where people did not have internet connections. That was done through multi-academy trusts and also local authorities, but it was then down to them to ensure local need was met. We are continuing to scale up our provision of laptops.

Our purchase and distribution roll-out of laptops was one of the largest and, it has been commented, most successful roll-outs that has ever been seen. But as you can imagine, procuring that number of laptops at speed from the other side of the globe is not without considerable logistical difficulties. We continue to work with major telecommunication companies to improve internet connectivity to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable families. We recognise the importance of support for schools in lockdown areas where they are suddenly in the position of not



being able to provide learning within the school. That is why we started the procurement of over 150,000 more laptops to support specific schools that have disadvantaged children, to support their learning.

Q216 Tom Hunt: This is linked to the online learning. It seems that, in the period schools were closed, the vast majority of teachers worked incredibly hard to continue to provide top-rate education to the people they were responsible for. However, there also seem to be some disparities. I think it is quite clear from some of the surveys and data that have been produced that, although the majority of schools and teachers did go above and beyond in unconventional circumstances to continue to provide education, there have been some occasions where, sadly, that did not happen, and often it has been disadvantaged children who have missed out. I am interested to know what plans you have if, going forward, there are further spikes and we have to have a rota system where online learning is here to stay for a while to come. What role will Ofsted play in holding schools to account and in monitoring the quality of the education provided so it does not disadvantage the disadvantaged?

Gavin Williamson: Tom, you are right to highlight this. So many schools, and hundreds of thousands of teachers, went absolutely above and beyond for their pupils with the contact, support and everything else, but there were some that did not do as much. We need to continue to raise that bar and to flesh out with ever further detail the expectations that we have so that schools are able to meet those. As you highlight, there is also the very important role in making assessments. If schools are not doing that in this period, quite simply, when they are inspected by Ofsted, if they are unable to evidence that, that will be reflected in what Ofsted does.

It is important to thank all those teachers, teaching assistants and support staff in schools up and down the country who have done so much and who, at every stage, have done everything they can to help pupils to continue to learn in these most difficult and different times.

Q217 Tom Hunt: We continue to hear evidence about problems with the SEN system at the local level. My understanding is the Government response to date and to a previous Committee's report seems to reject the idea of greater central oversight of local provision of SEN. What are your thoughts on this? Secondly, do you have a date for when the SEND review will be published?

Gavin Williamson: You rightly highlight the SEND review, and I do not want to pre-empt that SEND review with anything I say here. I take on board your point about there being inconsistencies in special educational needs provision. You have the brilliant, and then you have areas where it is not what we are hoping or wanting to see. How we get better consistency across the country is incredibly important. The SEND review will be reporting later than I would have liked to see, but we are very clear that we want to get that date of publication not too far off.



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Q218 **Chair:** When will it be published? Can you not just tell us when it is going to be published? It is not a big secret.

Gavin Williamson: It will not be until next year.

Q219 **Chair:** Early next year? Beginning of next year?

Gavin Williamson: It will be in the early part of next year, yes.

Q220 **Chair:** Why is it taking so long to publish the review?

Gavin Williamson: Basically, as you can imagine, an awful lot of the resource in the Department has been very much focused on dealing with the crisis that we have as a result of the global pandemic, but the important workstreams for the SEND review are running at full tilt to get the SEND review out at the earliest possible stage. I am sure Minister Ford will give you more details on that. We are in this crisis, and we had to look at how we put certain resources in different areas.

Q221 **Chair:** You will be aware of the "Panorama" report that came out last week on children with special education needs. While there is clearly still a postcode lottery in provision, there is a lot of anguish for parents. They wade through a treacle of bureaucracy. There are not enough professionals in schools despite some good things that are happening, and there are real problems with the implementation of the Act. I think this should be a priority for the Government because we should not allow these problems to drag on and on, even with the coronavirus.

Gavin Williamson: This is why we are absolutely committed to publishing it at the earliest possible point and working with experts across this field to ensure that, when it is published, it is the right report to publish and takes us in the right direction.

Could I also quickly add how important the incorporation of the work of the Department for Health is. So often when we talk about special educational needs, we are in danger of ignoring the impact of the integration of delivery of health as part of that package. We often talk about EHCP, but we must never forget the H in this.

Q222 **Chair:** The impression we had from our Committee report was that the H part of the EHCP was not quite invisible but almost invisible.

Gavin Williamson: A lot of very useful comments come out of a Select Committee report.

Tom Hunt: I think one of the benefits of it being slightly delayed is that there is an opportunity now to look at the specific ways the lockdown and covid-19 has impacted SEND people. Perhaps, if that slight delay means the report can be added to and we can have a sharp, laser-like focus on how SEND people have been impacted by the lockdown that could be welcome.

Q223 **Kim Johnson:** The final question, Secretary of State, is about exclusions and off-rolling. Black and SEND students are disproportionately excluded



from schools. Can you explain what measures the Department for Education has or will put in place to ensure that these children and young people are not subject to disproportionate levels of exclusion as they return to educational settings?

Gavin Williamson: It is always incredibly important that we have good behaviour policies within a school. This benefits all children, including those children who may be at risk of being excluded. Statutory guidance on exclusions is clear, and head teachers should avoid permanently excluding looked-after children and pupils with EHC plans as far as possible. Any disciplinary exclusion of a pupil, even for short periods of time, must always be consistent with relevant legislation, and schools should consider underlying factors contributing to poor behaviour before excluding.

One of the things we rolled out in the early part of this year was our behaviour hubs. What is important about this is that delivering good behaviour in schools has a disproportionate beneficial impact for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. We all remember the experience of being in school when you have poor behaviour and how much harder it is for all the other pupils to learn. How that is done is so incredibly important. The roll-out of these behaviour hubs and the impact they have on schools has one of the biggest impacts in reducing exclusions in schools. That is why strong behaviour policies and strong discipline policies are so vital for helping children of all backgrounds.

Q224 **Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State, I was written to last night by primary heads in Gateshead outlining a number of concerns about the management of their schools during covid-19, and they are a resourceful bunch. Can I send those concerns on to you?

Secondly, the NFER research report says the additional costs of covid-19 represent about £250,000 for a primary school and £750,000 for a secondary school. That covers things like supply cover, additional staff that have to come in, additional capital costs of equipment, separating materials, and also, of course, cleaning materials. It would be a real shame as a result of all this that the catch-up premium and any additional money for pupil premium was spent on that rather than on educating the children who most need that support. What additional resource will be made available by the DfE for schools to cover those additional costs?

Gavin Williamson: As we have seen, Ian, first, the catch-up premium is very much targeted at supporting the education of children through extra learning opportunities, so that is where the money should be spent. We had put measures of support in for schools pre the summer, and we keep that constantly under review going forward. We will continue to do that, working closely with the sector, to listen to their needs.

Q225 **Ian Mearns:** But the Department has said the initial expectation is that schools will pick up the costs themselves from September.



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Gavin Williamson: As I just said, we constantly keep this under review and look at it closely, as you would expect us to do.

Q226 **Chair:** The Education Policy Institute has suggested that the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils compared to their better-off peers is 18 months by the time they reach secondary school. Coronavirus aside, and the excellent catch-up premium aside, what is your long-term strategy to deal with the big gaps in attainment levels between disadvantaged pupils and the better off?

Gavin Williamson: Over the last 10 years, we have seen real strides in driving up standards. We need to look at how we complete that set of reforms in terms of continuing to drive standards ever higher.

Q227 **Chair:** They say the attainment levels have stalled over the last three years and have essentially reversed.

Gavin Williamson: This is why we need to look at how we drive that harder in raising standards in the most disadvantaged areas. This is why the early years and early development play an important and key role in how children do. As you know, sometimes that gap can open up at the very early stages of a child's development in the early years and at the start of education. But we are absolutely conscious of this. Yes, we have the covid catch-up fund. The reason that we are putting extra money into schools—that £14.4 billion package—is that we want to drive up school standards right across the country.

We want to look at how we drive the use of the premium to make sure that it is targeted more at interventions that really drive educational attainment for the children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Let's not forget that there is a significant amount of money that we are already spending on pupil premium that we need to ensure is driving attainment levels for those children.

Q228 **Chair:** Do you think the pupil premium should be a bit more ring-fenced?

Gavin Williamson: We need to ensure that it is always focused at driving the attainment of the children that it was designed for.

Q229 **Chair:** Or even an annual catch-up fund?

Gavin Williamson: I do not think we will get into spending review just yet.

Q230 **Chair:** Have you been supporting private sector innovation and charities like the Invicta Academy, which you are probably aware of? I think it did something like 36,000 lessons in Kent at a very low cost—about £1.70 or something per head.

Gavin Williamson: You have seen brilliant innovation from the charity sector and from schools themselves. You mention Invicta. Reach Academy was going above and beyond their educational role and playing a much bigger role right across their community in delivering 25,000



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meals to the wider community. We want to see and support that innovation. The obvious one is Oak National Academy. It is incredibly important that we see that innovation brought into playing a role in children's catch-up in closing the attainment gap between those who are rich and those who are less well off. The state should be an enabler of those organisations playing their roles.

Chair: It was interesting that you said the pupil premium should be more targeted, perhaps, which is quite an important thing.

Thank you very much for coming today. I hope you have enjoyed it. I thank your new permanent secretary and also Michelle for coming and answering the questions for such a long period of time. Can I ask if you will be able to appear at least once before Christmas?

Gavin Williamson: I am sure I look forward to seeing you in the not too distant future, around the winter period.

Chair: Thank you for that, and, again, I appreciate all of you for being accountable to the Committee today.