

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Opportunity Areas](#), HC 2026

Tuesday 14 May 2019

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Lucy Allan; Ben Bradley; Marion Fellows; Emma Hardy; Ian Mearns; Lucy Powell.

Questions 95 - 170

Witnesses

I: Nadhim Zahawi MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, Sue Baldwin, Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London, and Hannah Streatfeild, Deputy Director, Opportunity Areas.



Examination of witnesses

Nadhim Zahawi MP, Sue Baldwin and Hannah Streatfeild.

Q95 **Chair:** Good morning. Thank you very much for coming today. For the benefit of the tape and for those watching on parliamentary television, could you kindly introduce yourselves from our left to right?

Hannah Streatfeild: Hannah Streatfeild. I am the deputy director and senior responsible officer for the Opportunity Areas programme at the Department for Education.

Nadhim Zahawi: Nadhim Zahawi, Minister for Children and Families.

Sue Baldwin: I am Sue Baldwin. I am the regional schools commissioner for the east of England and north-east London.

Q96 **Chair:** Thank you. Just to let you know, the acoustics are never fantastic so if you could speak as loudly as you can, it would be great.

We spend, Minister, around £72 million on Opportunity Areas, plus the £24 million for Opportunity North East, even though we do not yet know the likely impact this will have. I am sure that, at the end of the programme, we will be able to see some tangible outcomes, but even if this does happen, how can we be confident that the marginal gains resulting from the programme will be higher than those we would have observed had we invested the money in other areas that we know have impact?

Nadhim Zahawi: Thank you, Chairman. You are quite right to point to the £72 million and also the £24 million for Opportunity North East. There is also the leveraging in of the additional £24 million¹, which is Essential Life Skills, into the Opportunity Areas.

When I came to this job, I was, like many of you here, mildly sceptical as to how these projects work that are place based. However, I looked at the detail of the Opportunity Areas and went out and attended the meetings held in Doncaster, Bradford and elsewhere, and I would say to you that this is the best infrastructure—in the 30 years that I have been in and around politics and the nine years that I have been in Parliament—that I have seen that has an opportunity for delivering.

Why do I say that? Essentially, what we are trying to do is to deliver improved outcomes for the most disadvantaged children in the places that have scored worst in the two indices—they came in the lower sextile for those—from early years all the way to employment. That is the target.

The other thing is to learn from that. What the team did—it was before my time, to be fair to them—

¹ The Department for Education subsequently clarified that this figure should be £22 million.



Chair: Going back to my question—

Nadhim Zahawi: I am going to address it head on.

Chair: In a nutshell, because we have a lot to get through.

Nadhim Zahawi: In a nutshell, what we did was we worked with local teams, which understand the characteristics of the local area, to develop their plans, and then we backed them. It is a bit like a start-up, where you are backing people who know their area best, with additional evidence from people like the EEF and others of what really does work, so if an area has a challenge around phonics, then that is the focus, but they lead on these things.

In terms of your very direct question as to how this is better, I think that, ultimately, because this is locally produced, it is better than the centre knowing best. We are going to measure it, of course. We measure outcomes for each plan. All these plans are published, and also what we think has worked and what has not worked.

Q97 **Chair:** Before committing the £96 million of taxpayers' money, did the Department carry out a scoping exercise to determine the likely cost of pulling this money from elsewhere and the potential return of investing in the Opportunity Areas programme?

Nadhim Zahawi: We invest in a wide variety of programmes. I think the pupil premium is now close on £15 billion of investment. This was very much about addressing places that were left behind—the opportunity cold spots, as we refer to them. It was before my time, but they looked at things like the London Challenge and Total Place. They looked at us designing a programme with all the evidence that we have centrally and imposing it on areas. As someone who has come from a world of entrepreneurship, I would say to you that this is probably the best chance I have seen of anything succeeding in making a real difference in terms of social mobility for the most disadvantaged areas in the country.

Chair: The 12 Opportunity Areas were not just selected based on relative deprivation; they were also selected based on value judgments, the region and the type of area. We have a spread of areas across the long list of 32, to understand different needs and to allow for better comparison between the areas. Therefore, in some cases, the Department selected areas that performed better than others. For example, Stoke-on-Trent measured 298 on the Social Mobility Commission grouping and 299 on the AEA grouping—the DfE grouping—and became an OA. At the same time, the following areas were not included, even though they scored worse than Stoke-on-Trent: Breckland in Norfolk has a rating of 306 in the social mobility group and 321 in the AEA DfE grouping, and Waveney in Suffolk has a rating of 301 in the SMC grouping and 323 in the AEA grouping. There are clearly extremely deprived areas that are not receiving the support they need. Therefore, my question to you is: what is the point of drawing such arbitrary lines in the sand? How can you justify taking a winner-takes-all approach instead



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of dividing the cake more fairly among the most desperately disadvantaged areas in the country?

Nadhim Zahawi: First of all, your question would be correct if this was the only thing we were doing, but it is not. This is part of a number of projects where we are effectively targeting and investing in the most disadvantaged areas in the country. My understanding—and I am happy to write to you about the specific examples you have just mentioned—is that the areas were chosen because they were in the bottom sextile of the two indices that you mention.

Hannah Streatfeild: If I can just add to that, one of the objectives of the programme is obviously around improving outcomes in those 12 areas. The second, and equally important, objective of the programme is around what we are learning in relation to both effective strategies for improving social mobility and the conditions that are needed to ensure those effective strategies take hold. In looking at choosing those 12 areas, we sought to choose a range—coastal, urban and rural—so we could get the richness of that data and intelligence to enable us to use the evaluation that we are doing across that programme to draw out lessons.

Q98 **Chair:** My point to you is that, as your own statistics show, there are a lot of other areas that have more deprivation, and yet they are not included in all this. I am not clear why you chose areas that have less deprivation than some that have more to become Opportunity Areas.

Hannah Streatfeild: As the Minister mentioned, we did shortlist them to 32 to be able to ensure that we were meeting the second objective of the programme as well as the first. As we evaluate the programme, we will be looking at what we can potentially scale up from the learning that we are doing and what the best practice is that we can share with some of those other areas. That is a really important part of what we are doing.

We then needed to choose within those 32. We did that in accordance with trying to ensure that we had that richness of data and richness of difference to ensure that we could collate that evaluation as effectively as possible.

Also, as the Minister referenced, Opportunity Areas are only one element of what the Department is looking at in relation to regional inequalities and reducing those, so we have things from early years all the way to post-16 that do that.

Q99 **Chair:** Two weeks ago, we had Opportunity Area members at a roundtable, and almost every one of them said the main purpose of Opportunity Areas was to bring people together. I have a list of quotes here. Simon Carnall: "What the Opportunity Area has done is galvanised the city. It has challenged the local authority to do better, if I am honest with you." Graham Cowley: "For me, it is about this sense of coming together, of collaboration". The argument was that the key thing with



Opportunity Areas was to bring key stakeholders together.

Is there a risk that there is too much money going into convening people and chasing vague goals, and not enough into frontline delivery? Is there a more cost-effective way—for example, using local councils or Mayors, where they exist, or even the local enterprise partnerships that already exist—to encourage a more integrated effort between the relevant agencies at a local level? Why do you need these ginormous structures to do this, to create completely new things and to pour in millions of pounds, when you could use existing organisations and institutions?

Nadhim Zahawi: First of all, they are not ginormous structures. If we look at the £72 million spend, of that only £2 million goes on what I would call administration costs. The balance goes to local authorities to then deliver on the plan that the Opportunity Areas have produced. That administrative cost has also leveraged the Essential Life Skills £22 million that I mentioned, without additional overhead, as I would describe it if I was in the private sector. Therefore, I think it is quite an efficient way of bringing stakeholders together to decide what the specific challenges are in that area because they know best.

Q100 **Chair:** You could have got the local councils to do it.

Nadhim Zahawi: Chairman, I spent three terms in local government, so I can tell you that local government does not have a fantastic ability to—

Chair: Or the enterprise boards.

Nadhim Zahawi: The beauty of this is it brings everyone together: the schools, the local authority, the LEP, the voluntary sector and businesses. What I saw when I was in Doncaster is schools saying that we have made a real difference to children's lives. Through this infrastructure we can continue to do that.

Q101 **Chair:** Some experts believe that the Opportunity Areas may be drawing disproportionate amounts of funding away from other areas. To what extent does the Department have a steer on the potential consequences of this, which is sucking out money from other projects dealing with disadvantage?

Nadhim Zahawi: I would respectfully disagree because this is additional investment, which is part of our broader approach to improving outcomes in areas where social mobility is low. It comes on top of other prioritised programmes for the disadvantaged: £120 million on the national collaborative outreach programme through the OFS; £10 million on a scholarship fund to incentivise take up of the gold-standard leadership national professional qualifications; greater focus by Teach First UK on recruiting graduates; and new opportunities for apprenticeships, which I know you are very passionate about, Chairman. That is just a sample of the support for disadvantaged areas. Of course, I think the pupil premium is touching £15 billion.

Q102 **Chair:** It is just that the OAs are offered priority access to a range of



initiatives. Examples include the Strategic School Improvement Fund, the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund, the Essential Life Skills programme, the CEC—I am going to come on to the Careers and Enterprise Company in a minute—the National Citizen Service and the National Collaborative Outreach Programme. I want to be clear that you have systems in place to make sure that money is not being taken away from these other projects.

Nadhim Zahawi: You ask a really good question, Chairman. The reason I am so passionate—I get excited about this—is that, as I said to you earlier, this is the first time in the 30 years I have been around Government where this might have a chance of working. Why? You have a local plan, and you have local people who know their area well coming together and saying, “Our challenge is in secondary education”, “Our challenge is in phonics”—whatever the challenge happens to be.

Q103 **Chair:** I want to know—just because of time—whether you have systems in place to make sure this is not happening.

Nadhim Zahawi: Of course, absolutely.

Hannah Streatfeild: Sir, if I just pick up on that.

Chair: Are you okay if we use first names?

Hannah Streatfeild: Yes, of course.

Chair: Thank you.

Hannah Streatfeild: In relation to a number of the programmes you mentioned there, if we take, for example, the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund, that is available to all category 5 and 6 areas, not just Opportunity Areas. What Opportunity Areas does is that it looks at how it uses TLIF alongside all the other initiatives that are going on in an area, but it is not taking away TLIF from other category 5 and 6 areas because it is also eligible for them.

That would be the same, for example, with a national breakfast programme; Opportunity Areas are eligible for that. That is targeted in relation to the numbers of free school meal pupils in different schools. Again, Opportunity Areas are taking advantage of that, and we are using the convening power of Opportunity Areas to ensure that those things are embedded alongside the other programmes we are doing. Other areas across the country that are equally facing disadvantage get access to them too.

Nadhim Zahawi: I was just going to say—

Chair: Very briefly.

Nadhim Zahawi: Very briefly, you have locally led plans that can have access to national programmes that are evidence-based. Basically, we are joining up the dots for the first time in trying to deal with this really important issue.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q104 **Chair:** On the Careers and Enterprise Company, the careers strategy already has a budget for engaging Opportunity Areas. The careers strategy says CEC will invest £2 million in Careers and Enterprise activities in the 12 Opportunity Areas and that the CEC will triple the number of cornerstone employers committing to work with schools and colleges—including Opportunity Areas—to 150. The evidence from last week's Opportunity Areas hearing suggested that partnership boards are reaching out to the CEC. Can you confirm that the funding for this engagement is coming only from the CEC's existing pot and not from the £6 million allocated to each area?

Hannah Streatfeild: Sir, I can answer that question. The majority of the funding is coming from the CEC existing pot. There is about £500,000. That is referred to in the top slice that the Minister already alluded to—the £2 million we have taken off the £70 million.

Q105 **Chair:** Why are you replicating money? Given the huge budget the CEC has, why do you need to give them any more money to do this?

Hannah Streatfeild: This was not a replication of money; this was to enable funding for some specific careers leader training that was identified as a need.

Q106 **Chair:** Why not get them to use the existing money rather than use vital money that could be spent on other things? Obviously, £500,000 is still a lot of money.

Hannah Streatfeild: It was in addition to the things that the CEC was already delivering for us. It had been agreed. It was based on additional—

Q107 **Chair:** If I can just ask the Minister this: the CEC may not be your area, and I understand that, but why not use the existing huge budget that the CEC has—many millions of pounds—to do this rather than give them extra money on top? Again, it is going back to what I was asking about—sucking out money that could be spent on deprivation in other areas.

Nadhim Zahawi: The additional £500,000 is for work that was identified by the Opportunity Areas above and beyond the work the CEC was doing.

Chair: This is specifically done by the CEC. You are giving it extra money even though it already has a massive budget from the DfE.

Hannah Streatfeild: It was in addition to what we had already agreed. If we look at the total budget the CEC is using in terms of Opportunity Areas, that is over £5 million that is coming from the careers budget that was already set out. As I said, this was a specific need that was identified through Opportunity Areas as we went through the programme, because we were responding to the local intelligence about what could be done in addition to the offer that was already being made.

Q108 **Chair:** When can we expect to be able to measure reliably whether any of this is working?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Nadhim Zahawi: Last October, we did publish a report that looked at the learnings, but we will obviously continue to monitor. By 2020-21, we will have a full evaluation of the programmes and the learnings.

Chair: September, did you say?

Nadhim Zahawi: Last October we published. I am sure the Committee must have seen a copy. If not, we can supply it.

Lucy Powell: The last evaluation? Yes, we have had that.

Nadhim Zahawi: You have had that?

Lucy Powell: Yes.

Hannah Streatfeild: A full evaluation will be undertaken after the end of the three-year programme.

This is probably an opportunity to say we do monitor progress as we are going along, as does each of the areas. We are already beginning to see some green shoots of impact, which is really important for us in terms of the local areas going, "What is working? What is not working? What changes need to be made?" I can give some examples of those now, or we can come on to them later, if that is helpful.

Q109 **Chair:** The reason why I asked the question is because, with the official evaluation report that you mentioned, for some there is a frustration that slower progress had been made than expected, "Across OAs it was felt that the ask of measuring the impacts of the programme would need to extend over five to 15 years in order to capture the longer-term effect of their work on social mobility." There is a suggestion that the "DfE should consider extending the timeline of the programme to reflect the concerns identified by interviewees and ensure the programme has a realistic prospect of achieving cultural change."

Nadhim Zahawi: I am quite passionate about this. You could have gone down the route early on of saying, "The centre knows best. We will just design a programme for you, and we will ask you to implement it locally." It has been done before in Government. Successive Governments of different colours have tried it. It has not worked. We came up with this idea where we get local leadership and local people to design the programme and we back them.

It is a bit like a start-up. The challenge here, and the tension, is whether you go faster by instructing areas that this is what they need to do—you do not really know whether they are delivering it or not, because you do not really know the area well—or whether you allow local teams, local leadership, to deliver what they think is right. There are challenges around that. Like any start-up, the tension is at the beginning. They want to get it right. They want to do the right thing. They want it to be evidence-based and evidence-led, which is why we are slower in terms of getting out and delivering programmes that make a difference. I think £45 million now is spent or committed out of the £72 million. So you get



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that sort of start-up thing where you get evidence, strategy and then implementation, and then it picks up.

My concern—I will air it in front of your Committee—is that so much of what we do in Government is short term and is not given the chance to really begin to hum—to deliver. However, in three years, I am convinced we will have a legacy and a sustainability that is good. I certainly will be putting my best foot forward to see this programme extended; otherwise, I think you will not get the full extent of it.

Chair: I have two quick questions from my colleagues, Lucy Powell and Ian, and then I am going to pass to Lucy Allan.

Q110 **Lucy Powell:** My question was about that timeline, because I think this is a real area that needs proper scrutiny. I agree with you that this is about start-up funding on one level. However, does a three-year timeframe not make the whole ethos, the whole culture around this and the whole drivers very short term in terms of proving the value of what you are trying to do?

If you look at London Challenge or any place-based initiative, most people who have operated in this sort of way in these sorts of spaces will be talking about a 10-year plan to really build that legacy of transforming lives in the early years or whatever it is. It feels like this sort of timeframe is more a ministerial demand than it is an effective timeframe for what you are trying to change here.

Nadhim Zahawi: One of the first observations I made when I got this job was, “This is fantastic. Whoever thought of this is really clever.” That is because I have not seen anything like this in 30 years, as I said. I think three years creates a healthy tension in terms of, you have to get on and start delivering your plan, and you have to hold peoples’ feet, and your own, to the fire.

However, I would absolutely agree with you, Lucy, and say that when something like this is really working—I passionately believe it is already, and it will continue to show progress—surely to God, it would be a terrible thing to then cut it when it is just beginning to take off. I would like to, hopefully, convince my colleagues at the Treasury that this is something worth investing in, because I think it is the right infrastructure. I know the Committee has doubts about it.

Q111 **Lucy Powell:** It is also about being clear what success looks like in those three years.

Nadhim Zahawi: Correct.

Q112 **Lucy Powell:** You are not necessarily talking about massive changes in outcomes in that timeframe, but you might start to see some underlying trends. The Troubled Families Programme would be another example of a place-based thing where everybody said after the first phase, “Let’s cut it. It is a disaster.” There was some really good stuff there. It might not



meet a *Daily Mail* headline, but it is doing some good work.

Nadhim Zahawi: You are absolutely right on that, in the sense that I think we will get some really good things out of the three years.

By the way, when I sit with the chairs of the OAs—they agree with me on this—I have said, “Yes, we need to look at a longer term strategy on this, but I think we also need to address the sustainability and the legacy of this programme at the three-year marker.” The two things are not incompatible. It is not a trade-off.

If we begin to think about what we have learnt, where the evidence is, what have we achieved at three years, what the legacy is of this and how we sustain this if there is no more funding, that in itself is a good exercise to undertake for the discipline of the teams. It also helps the Minister to be able to go to the Treasury and say, “Here is the evidence.”

Lucy Powell: They need to be a bit clearer about success after three years, and that that is not about X% of X%.

Nadhim Zahawi: Yes, exactly.

Q113 **Ian Mearns:** Having had previous experience of time-limited project funding, I must admit that what happens—unless there is some sort of sustainability built into it—is that, at the end of the process, all of the partners round the table, without the resources available that used to be there, drift off, because their own organisations, working in hard times financially, have their own priorities, which do not match the priorities of the joint organisation that the partnership has become. How are we going to mitigate against that happening—the whole thing evaporating after three years? Some lessons might have been learnt, and some relationships might have been built, but without that funding to glue it together, it might well be that the three-year programme gets lost in the mists of time.

Nadhim Zahawi: Again, a very good point, powerfully made. What I am trying to get to is a place where we learn what worked, where the evidence is, what is sustainable, and what can be sustained and at what level of investment beyond the three years—from being ultra-ambitious to just saying, “What would be a minimum level of infrastructure that would sustain all the good stuff?”—so that, as you say, we do not just let it disappear after three years. That is the exercise I am going through.

I would like to certainly make the argument to the Treasury that we ought to be looking at this and becoming more, not less, ambitious on this. I am convinced this is the best way of doing investment from the centre in place-based social mobility. I think that is where I would like to be. At the same time, I also have to be a realist and say, “What is sustainable?” I do not want to lose the good work that we have done.

Q114 **Lucy Allan:** Minister, I have never been a huge advocate of the Opportunity Areas, and nothing I have heard this morning convinces me



that I perhaps should take a different view. Like you, I used to be in local government, sitting at roundtables of multi-agency partnership boards with chairs of different areas and minutes of meetings. Could the money, which was made available to these deprived areas, have gone direct to grassroots organisations that were already in place?

Nadhim Zahawi: We were at the same council at different times. Like you, I was sceptical when I came into this. However, when I went out and saw the work—whether in Bradford, Derby or the fenlands—I realised very quickly that you need an infrastructure like this. Not for me, not for my officials—

Q115 **Lucy Allan:** You mentioned £2 million was going on the infrastructure.

Nadhim Zahawi: Correct, the rest goes to the frontline.

Lucy Allan: The remainder, the £70 million, goes straight to local authorities. Does that actually mean to a frontline activity, or does that mean—

Nadhim Zahawi: That is a good question. I knew you would probably ask that question, Lucy. Ninety per cent. of the £70 million is then delivered to the frontline programmes. The reason I say to you, come out and have a look at the work they are doing, is that this is different. History is littered with politicians saying, “This is different.” I sincerely feel this really is different because the plans that have been developed have been developed locally, not just by the local authorities—of course, local authorities are very important to this—but by the other stakeholders. The schools are around the table, the LEP is around the table, and the voluntary sector is around the table, and they do not just sit there.

Q116 **Lucy Allan:** That is a big table, which is my problem.

Nadhim Zahawi: It is a big table, you are absolutely right, but the chairs of those Opportunity Areas are unbelievably committed, such as Sir Martin Narey. You have had a number of chairs before you.

Q117 **Lucy Allan:** Do they get paid? Does Sir Martin Narey get paid for that?

Nadhim Zahawi: They don’t get paid for the work they do in this. If we ask them to do additional work, there may be a very small daily rate type of payment. This is not a great big quango. If you look at the numbers, it really isn’t.

I hope I can convince you that, when you look at their plans and the targets for what they are trying to do, these are hard targets and really tough things to deliver. It is not a talking shop where everybody sits around the table patting each other on the back saying, “Aren’t we all really great at doing this?” They actually have to deliver these things.

Q118 **Lucy Allan:** What about areas like my constituency—it is in the bottom decile of the Sutton Trust social mobility index, and is 494 out of 533—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

which do not qualify for this scheme? There will be lots of other, similar areas of significant disadvantage. Is the scheme not actually enhancing that level of disadvantage, because we not looking at them and we are not trying to address their problems? We are more focused on our cherry-picked areas?

Nadhim Zahawi: You are absolutely right to challenge us on this. All I would say to you is that this is one part of a much greater investment we are making, including, obviously, the pupil premium that is touching £15 billion since 2011.

What I would say to you is that, if you are going to try to implement a programme as ambitious as this—this is an ambitious programme, and it is difficult work to deliver this stuff—what you cannot do is try to hug the world, in my view. People might disagree and say, “You should do more areas more quickly.” I say to you, “No, I want to do this well.” You need people to have a reason to believe—including your Committee and the rest of the House—that this stuff works. We learn from it, and then we continue to look at how we can do it better.

When we published last October’s report, we looked at what happens in areas that do not have an Opportunity Area. Can they do a slimmed down, “Opportunity Area in a box” version of taking the learnings from last October? Can we say, “Here is a package of learning that you can implement in your own area”? I think—I would say this, wouldn’t I?—that this is the right way of doing it.

Chair: Can I just ask you to be more concise because we have a lot to get through?

Nadhim Zahawi: Of course.

Q119 **Lucy Allan:** A quick question: can you confirm that there is no plan at the moment to scrap Opportunity Areas? I had heard they may get scrapped. Is that incorrect?

Nadhim Zahawi: There are no plans to scrap Opportunity Areas. I am determined in fact to do the opposite—to make the best pitch I can.

Q120 **Lucy Allan:** I have one last point to drill down on in response to an answer you gave around payments to the chairmen of Opportunity Areas. You suggested some of them may get additional work as a consequence of their position as chairmen. Is that additional work remunerated, or is there anything they might get remunerated for as a consequence of being an Opportunity Area chair?

Nadhim Zahawi: No.

Lucy Allan: Nothing?

Nadhim Zahawi: Not for the position of chairman, absolutely not.

Q121 **Chair:** I think the underlying premise of Lucy’s first question is whether these, basically, giant quangos, bringing together the usual suspects, are



costing an enormous amount of money, meaning there is not as much money to go round, when we are not yet clear whether these quangos are successful or not.

Nadhim Zahawi: You have asked about success twice now, Chairman. I think we are beginning to see it, and Hannah referred to it.

I do not think they are large quangos. When you attend the board meetings, the people around the table are people who are running the local schools, who are running the local businesses and the local community voluntary sector. They are all sitting around the table saying, "Where are we on this target? How are we doing on this?" It feels to me like something very different from what I have seen in my 30 years around Government, honestly.

Chair: Whenever any initiative or scheme takes place, any Minister would say that.

Nadhim Zahawi: Let me give you some evidence.

Q122 **Chair:** For example, you could have spent £70 million on getting some of the finest teachers in the land to work in the areas of the most disadvantage. That probably would have had more effect than creating a whole load of regional boards and quangos, and giving millions of pounds to the CEC when it has money already, and so on.

Nadhim Zahawi: Hannah tried to address that and talked about schools being in category 6² of achieving excellence areas in the OAs, as other schools are as well, so they get that additional support anyway. What this does is bring together all the stakeholders in an area to ask the uncomfortable questions, and ask about the uncomfortable truths—"Here are our challenges. How can we deliver on them?"—and then, together, put that plan in place, with the evidence from people like the EEF and with access to national programmes to deliver on that.

Q123 **Ian Mearns:** I have mentioned in this Committee on more than one occasion the fact that there was not an Opportunity Area in north-east England. As a response to that and some other entreaties from people in the region, the Opportunity North East programme was established.

We now have a situation where you have ministerial oversight of the Opportunity Areas, and Lord Agnew has oversight of Opportunity North East. What discussions do you have on a regular basis with Lord Agnew about the interaction between Opportunity North East and the Opportunity Areas, and how is best practice being shared between the two different programmes?

Nadhim Zahawi: We obviously talk as a team all the time—weekly. The challenge—you know this better than anyone, Ian—around Opportunity North East was secondary education. It was felt we needed to do

² The Department for Education subsequently clarified that the Minister should have referred to schools in category 5 and 6.



something slightly different to what we are doing on Opportunity Areas, but the learning goes across. One of our senior officials, who chairs³ one of the Opportunity Areas, also chairs⁴ Opportunity North East, so the work is seamless in that sense. It is pan-region. I know that, obviously, in previous sessions, you were concerned about particular parts of your constituency not getting additional support.

Q124 **Ian Mearns:** I am. I think the geography of Opportunity North East is interesting in as much that you have to have a Conservative local authority, a Conservative metro Mayor or a Conservative MP in your area to be covered by Opportunity North East. The areas that are exclusively Labour councils and Labour MPs do not have an Opportunity Area function. I cannot believe that the deprivation in South Tyneside or Gateshead is better than Northumberland, for instance.

Nadhim Zahawi: As I said, you quite rightly challenged us on why Northumberland—

Ian Mearns: Particularly when Damian came to my constituency to launch the programme in the first place.

Nadhim Zahawi: I can assure you every area will benefit from the work of Opportunity North East.

Q125 **Ian Mearns:** The thing about the Opportunity Areas, with a pot of £72 million, is that the Opportunity Areas also have leverage to bring in funds from other existing initiative programmes. Is that also the case with Opportunity North East? I have not seen any evidence of that so far.

Nadhim Zahawi: What Lord Agnew and I are trying to do—I press the point in the Department all the time—is to make sure that, since we are making this investment in Opportunity North East and in the Opportunity Areas, whenever we have a national programme, they should be able to have a crack at getting some of that funding into those areas. That is the underlying principle that Damian has also articulated to the whole Department. This is part of my frustration sometimes about joined-up Government or a joined-up Department. You have people working on lots of very big things, but my sort of sales pitch is, “Hey, let’s remember we have this amazing infrastructure over here, so why don’t we just make more use of it?”

Ian Mearns: Thank you very much.

Q126 **Ben Bradley:** Good morning. I have to say I share the concerns of colleagues in terms of the duplication of boards. I was in a meeting with universities this week. They told me they had to convene boards and panels of local authorities and people to get them to work together because nobody is. They sit on all of these boards already, and they find

³ The Department for Education subsequently clarified that the Minister should have said that the senior official leads Opportunity North East/the Opportunity Areas rather than chairs.

⁴ Ditto.



it very frustrating that they have to go to meeting after meeting about the same thing. It is a huge challenge.

Equally, around the selection of areas, my Mansfield constituency is the eighth coldest of the cold spots in the country. Most of North Nottinghamshire is higher on that list than Derby or Stoke, for example, and yet there is nothing in Nottinghamshire. It does feel incredibly frustrating.

I want to touch on some of the comments you have made about choosing not to impose things on a national level but to have that local accountability. From the discussions we had last week, it seems to me that it still is the DfE imposing things. They told us that they were told which programmes they can and cannot do and which organisations they have to work with. Is it not just a kind of façade of accountability on a local level, when, actually, it is still the DfE dictating what happens?

Nadhim Zahawi: The experience I have had for over a year now is that the leadership is fiercely independent. Not only do the chairs meet with my officials and with me, but they have separate time to meet without any of us in the room. They really are passionate about their local plan and what they are trying to deliver.

What we tried to do—which I think is a good innovation and was articulated badly by this Minister at the outset of this evidence session—is to get local people who know their area to develop a plan and then to expose them to national programmes and the evidence behind those national programmes. They can then say, “My issue here is phonics, so I will access this programme from you,” or, “My issue is exposing young people to local job opportunities, so I want to do more of that.” Therefore, it is evidence-led, rather than us imposing it.

That is really smart because so much of what we do in Government is about a load of very clever people in different Departments thinking they have the right idea. A Minister or, dare I say, a Secretary of State or the Prime Minister, wants an initiative, and then officials launch something and say, “This is what we are doing because that is what we will do.” This is locally produced, so I think it has the best opportunity.

I do not know about the university example you gave. I can say to you that if you attend one of the meetings, you will see that they do go through their plan, where they are on it and whether they are meeting the targets—like a proper board meeting.

Q127 **Ben Bradley:** I am sure there are great benefits. It is just a shame it is not happening in my area. I cannot really see how they can be genuinely independent and critical when, ultimately, the chairs are appointed, hired and fired by the DfE and will have to be accountable to the DfE. Therefore, to what extent can they be honest?

Nadhim Zahawi: They are accountable to their plan rather than to the DfE. What they are trying to do is deliver on that plan. Before I joined



HOUSE OF COMMONS

this place, I was a non-executive director on a board of a FTSE 250 company. The CEO hired me to be a non-executive director, but my job was to scrutinise his executive decisions and his team. I would not hold back from saying, "I think we need to do more here if the company is to deliver this." I certainly have not experienced it as an issue; there is no one around the table saying, "Oh, yes, you are the great sage. You tell me what to do with my area." It is the opposite.

Q128 Ben Bradley: Why did the Department feel the need to tell the people that came to our roundtable the other week what they should say in the meeting? They were all briefed beforehand by the DfE.

Hannah Streatfeild: I can respond to that question, being the civil servant in charge. We did not brief everyone who attended as to what to say. I actually was in attendance, but I was in attendance in terms of showing support and commitment to the great work that they do in their local areas. I think it would have been remiss of me not to be there and to thank them for coming to talk about this programme and for giving up their time to do so. It was very much in a supportive capacity, rather than that we were in any way briefing them as to, "You must say this," or, "You must not say that". I think that was evident in some of the—

Q129 Ben Bradley: It seemed like the templates of their written evidence were provided by the DfE as well.

Hannah Streatfeild: The chairs will consult with my head of delivery. There is a real strength of collaboration between the partnership boards and indeed my teams.

Q130 Chair: The evidence of people who came to us was that it was micromanaged by the DfE, and the template responses and layout were very similar. Why was it felt that was necessary?

Hannah Streatfeild: It was not in any way imposed. I think chairs were looking for support in bringing that stuff together but, ultimately, it was for chairs to sign that information off, to ensure that it was their information and that they were held to account for that.

As I said, our teams work incredibly closely together. Where a chair knows there is a lot of information held by my colleagues within the Department, they will seek to draw upon that but then put their own stamp and own tilt on that because, ultimately, it was the chairs' submissions.

Q131 Chair: It did not look like that. From the way the evidence was sent, and the way that the witnesses were primed and briefed, it seemed to me you were very much micromanaging the whole process.

Hannah Streatfeild: I think, from some of the examples that came out of the roundtable and their evidence, it was not the case. The chair of Blackpool talked about the NCS and some of his issues around that. They talked about further engagement with post-16. We are really interested



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to hear those lessons, so it would not be in our best interest to tell them what to say. This was an opportunity for us as a Department, beyond the regular chair meetings we have with them, to hear from chair, to get that challenge and to ensure that we are reacting to that and collaborating with them.

For example, we have a chairs' meeting in a month's time, and in response to some of the things they were saying in that panel, Martina Milburn is going to be coming along. We are also going to get BEIS and DWP colleagues to talk about what more we can be doing in the post-16 space, what more we can be doing in terms of engaging with other Departments. That was a direct response to the challenge that has been raised by them. It was not a direct response to a challenge we told them to raise.

Q132 Ben Bradley: You mentioned Graham Cowley from Blackpool, who said that he had been told that they had to work with the NCS, even though the NCS didn't really exist in their area. It was something that he felt he had to go along with—the DfE steer. Why is that, and how broadly are the Department saying, "You must work with these people, whether it is relevant on a local level or not"?

Hannah Streatfeild: At the beginning of the programme, as the Minister alluded to, we did provide an offer of various different national programmes that areas might want to draw down upon. NCS was one of those. NCS is actually already working in Blackpool, but potentially on a more limited scale than some of the other areas.

What we have absolutely encouraged, and what has been driven by local areas, is them going, "Well, how can this programme—such as the NCS—help us to meet our targets in a particular area? How does it meet the need? Does it, doesn't it? If it does, then, absolutely, let's draw on it. If it doesn't, then we will limit drawing on those national programmes." We have seen that flex across the different areas.

In Blackpool, for example, they have very much worked with the NCS—and this is the infrastructure we have sought to create—to flex the engagement that they have had with the NCS and, indeed, flex the nature of the NCS's offer. In particular, ensuring there is a higher focus in terms of disadvantaged young people and the instance of them joining in in terms of NCS offers, but also engaging them with specific other voluntary organisations—some of the work that the council are doing in relation to care leavers. It is not, "This is a programme that is being imposed." It is, "Here is an offer to you. How do you want to flex it to ensure that it meets the needs of the programme in that particular area?"

Nadhim Zahawi: Do they sit on the working group?

Hannah Streatfeild: Yes, the NCS do sit on the working group, but alongside a number of other voluntary organisations.



Q133 **Lucy Powell:** Just briefly on that, I can see the value in saying, “Here is some very strong evidence base.” You have the EEF coming in saying, “These sorts of programmes could make an impact done in this kind of way,” as a guideline for some commissioning. But in terms of national, big programmes like NCS, the jury is still out really on NCS, isn’t it? Do you know what I mean? Is this not just about trying to boost other DfE favoured pet projects? That is something we have heard a lot of as well—that sort of initiativitis. You have a little pet project so you say, “Let’s get the Opportunity Areas to commission and boost that as well.”

Sue Baldwin: I have three Opportunity Areas in my area, and they are all very different. There is an element of consistency in that they are all really keen on early years, for example, because the difference between disadvantaged children and their peers is massive, and then against the rest of the country it is massive again, so they are really focusing in on that. There is also an issue around the Opportunity Areas where I am, where there is more capacity in some places than others. In Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, for example, I would love us to be able to access lots and lots of teaching school activity, which is like a DfE national school improvement leadership role, but it is very limited there.

The work that the Opportunity Area is doing in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire is thinking, “How can we create really good ITT and teaching qualifications, making what use we can of what is available via the usual DfE initiatives? Where they do not exist or they are not here on the ground, right here, right now, what can we do to make it much more positive and sustainable?”

Q134 **Lucy Powell:** I don’t think that is really my question. My question was more about there being a strong evidence base. EEF is probably one of the main stamp marks of that. It has programmes that might help with the early years or whatever. It is a different thing to saying, “We have some national pet projects that may or may not fit your need, which do not have some of the evidence base behind them. We are going to shoehorn that in because that is what we want to do at DfE.”

Hannah Streatfeild: Just to pick up on that. That is not what we have done. In terms of what has happened—

Q135 **Lucy Powell:** It is what we have heard, not just in the roundtable but in the evidence sessions and in other things that we have had. In headteachers’ roundtables and other things, that is what we have heard has been a frustration.

Hannah Streatfeild: We will definitely take that away. If that is what we are hearing, we need to make sure that we are able to counter that, because that is certainly not the intention.

Nadhim Zahawi: I had the opposite in Doncaster. There was a brilliant kid, who came through the work of the NCS there, and he was at one stage completely on the wrong side of the tracks.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lucy Powell: No, I am not dismissing NCS. I have met loads of young people who have had a fantastic experience with NCS. I am not dissing NCS. I am saying it is a very well-resourced national programme that critics might say has not provided the outcomes that that kind of money warrants. It is a separate question.

Q136 **Chair:** It costs a lot of money, and some people say you could have used the scouts, for example, much cheaper. What were the criteria for deciding the NCS would be on the board of this?

Lucy Powell: It has been quite a big scheme.

Chair: You would semi-impose it on the various Opportunity Areas.

Nadhim Zahawi: I don't think we imposed it on anyone.

Hannah Streatfeild: No, in terms of the NCS, we are not giving it any additional money. This would be happening anyway. What we have done through the partnerships that we have with the NCS, and indeed through involving NCS where it is appropriate—for example, Blackpool have chosen to have the NCS on their working group, and that was not imposed—is go, "How can we ensure NCS, given it is already happening, works better in this area?"

There is no additional funding from the DfE for that, but you have all these people around the table going, "Let's think about this. It is going to be happening anyway. How do we ensure that it is flexed to the need of that area?" For example, they have linked up with the pupil referral unit, and they have linked up with the council services supporting young people in care, all in terms of trying to tailor that offer, which was already in existence. It is about making something that is already in existence work better and more effectively.

Lucy Powell: Yes, but there could well be loads of youth organisations in Blackpool who would have been able to do that faster and with more agility. Anyway, the point is, maybe just have a look at that. It is one thing to have the evidence-based programmes that are very clear as a suite of things to commission from. It is another to have the pet national DfE preferred partners, which does not always work.

Q137 **Emma Hardy:** I was interested, Minister, when you were talking about one of the strengths of the project being about local people who know the area well and about locally led programmes, because the NFER evaluation into the partnership boards stated, "A small number of local stakeholders questioned why some individuals had been invited to join the board as opposed to someone else (e.g. 'headteacher X' rather than 'headteacher Y'). This created a mild sense of mistrust among some stakeholders about the DfE's motivations behind the 20 appointments and the programme overall." Having a mild sense of distrust in the partnership boards that you have created is not ideal, is it?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Nadhim Zahawi: I would completely agree with you. If there is evidence of that, we will happily look at it. I think this Committee has a track record of delivering reports that—

Q138 **Emma Hardy:** This is from the NFER's evaluation that I think your Department had commissioned.

Nadhim Zahawi: Sorry, I missed the first bit of your question. I thought this was through the evidence here.

Emma Hardy: No.

Nadhim Zahawi: You are right to say that there will be people who may feel or have felt, "Why have particular headteachers been chosen?" but from my experience of the boards, they try to bring in all the stakeholders in education, health, and business across the board, and it is locally led. These are things that—

Q139 **Emma Hardy:** The question is about who the local leaders are who are being chosen. This is a report that your Department commissioned from the NFER. What action has been taken to quell this sense of mistrust over who is on the partnership boards?

Nadhim Zahawi: I constantly go out and meet with the local—

Q140 **Emma Hardy:** Has there been a review done of who is on the boards and the reason why they have been chosen?

Nadhim Zahawi: We have not reviewed—

Hannah Streatfeild: Again, because it is a bottom-up programme, we have not nationally reviewed each of the partnership boards. Effectively, those partnership boards are led by a local independent chair. I know from attending various different boards that they have individually ensured that, within those boards, they continually look at the membership of the boards—they have evolved over time, and the chair of the Blackpool partnership board referenced that in a recent roundtable as well. As the programme develops, and as that board is consulting further and further with various different individuals and organisations across the area, it is only natural that they should and would then evolve.

Q141 **Emma Hardy:** Some of the appointments there were DfE appointments. There is a sense that they have been appointed because they match the ideology of the Department for Education. This was at the same time that there was lots of coverage around the academisation and expansion of grammars, and it seems that the people who have been appointed are the ones who fit that same way of thinking, as opposed to people who are genuinely local leaders in the area.

Nadhim Zahawi: The infrastructure was in place before my time. I can certainly tell you I have not in any way sought to influence any of the appointments on any of the boards based on ideology or otherwise. The reason I have been waxing lyrical about how innovative this



HOUSE OF COMMONS

infrastructure is, is because it is locally led. We listened to the leadership, in terms of challenges but also in terms of what we need to do to make sure that we support them in their delivery.

Q142 **Emma Hardy:** Going back to the point I made before, how you can quell that sense of mistrust to regain trust in the area?

Nadhim Zahawi: By delivering. Ultimately, how do you make people believe? You have to give them a reason to believe.

Q143 **Emma Hardy:** No, but the sense of mistrust is over the appointments, who is on these partnership boards and the reason why they are there.

Nadhim Zahawi: As I said, from what I have seen, I haven't seen anyone there about whom someone has said, with a nudge and a wink, "Well, they are on because they fit our criteria." They are there because they are part of the stakeholder landscape in that particular area and are going above and beyond in what they are trying to do.

I was struck by a headteacher of two schools in Doncaster. One of her schools is in the most deprived street in the country. She was at the board explaining how she goes about making sure that persistent absenteeism is dealt with. She literally doesn't wait and just ring the parents. She walks down the road, knocks on the door, goes and has a cup of tea with them and talks to them. This is the level of granularity of the local expertise that is on the boards.

All I can say is that I assure you that this Minister—and I think my predecessor and anyone else in the Department—would not set the criteria for who is on the board because they fit a certain political or ideological definition.

Q144 **Marion Fellows:** Sue, this is for you as an RSC yourself. You have already said you are on three Opportunity Area boards anyway, so what is the role of an RSC on an Opportunity Area partnership board?

Sue Baldwin: I attend them, in the sense of being on it. I attend them, or my deputy does, because there are three and they take place on the same day, so we go. Because of the role that we have with senior Department officials, there is a role there—to give life to the point that Lucy was making—in that we can have that overview and be alive to all the connections that the Opportunity Area programme might be making in terms of what is going on.

I am really deeply keen about apprenticeships due to a previous existence. I am keen to understand how the Opportunity Areas are maximising those. There is an element of being able to link back into the Department's other initiatives—being very careful about that. There is an element of knowing what is going on in the school system, working with a local authority in the school system, both in academies and with local authority schools of all kinds—special schools, as well as mainstream



HOUSE OF COMMONS

schools—bringing that to bear and working with the multi-academy trust leaders.

In my area, the vast majority of secondary schools are academies. Therefore, I would be looking for the multi-academy trust leaders to be very active participants. Even though they may only have one or two schools in the Opportunity Area, I would want them to bring that to bear. I can challenge and support them to do that outside of the remit of the Opportunity Area. I galvanise and advocate, I think, as well.

On the point about learning from what is happening in the Opportunity Areas, I completely understand that there is a three-year programme with a three-year evaluation going on. Early signs are coming through the annual data and local information that the schools and the local authority will have. Already, for me, it is about just being able to make connections, say, back into Waveney, which you mentioned as an area that is deprived, and thinking about the 5 and 6 areas, of which I have a lot in the region. There is an element of me giving to the Opportunity Area, but there is also an element of me taking from it immediately and spreading things around the rest of the region.

I also sit on the programme board, which is like the internal programme board. I see myself very much alongside the schools, alongside the work that is going on with the parents, alongside the work that is going on with the local authority and the health people as a part of the solution. It is owning—collective ownership—and advocating for tweaks and changes back at the programme board as well.

Q145 **Marion Fellows:** How accountable are you for the Opportunity Areas in your patch?

Sue Baldwin: I suppose I am accountable in that I am a shared owner of the Opportunity Area delivery plan. I would expect the national schools commissioner to say to me, “What is happening in your Opportunity Areas? Are you able to lead with the kind of support that you need from the multi-academy trust to use that influence and that negotiation that we have?” I am as accountable as my local authority DCS colleagues, in that we collectively own the plan and we collectively own the delivery of that plan.

Q146 **Chair:** Thank you. Just before I pass on to Ian, are you going to formally respond to the NFER report on the impact and evaluation? They are doing two reports, but they have published the one that we have mentioned. Are you going to formally respond to those?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will obviously look at them in detail and take the learnings from them. This is an iterative process; this is not a static process. We are constantly trying to get better at doing things.

Q147 **Chair:** What do you think of it so far?

Nadhim Zahawi: I think we are in a good place. Genuinely—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q148 **Chair:** No, of their conclusions so far?

Nadhim Zahawi: As I said earlier to Emma, I take on board any criticism, and we will look at it seriously.

Q149 **Chair:** What are the targets for the Opportunity Areas. Can you give us an example of one you have set and how you have measured the progress of your targets?

Nadhim Zahawi: Each area will have a set of targets. For example, for North Yorkshire Coast, 20 EYFS settings have received a quality assessment using a well-evidenced framework, targeting settings with the highest number of children, assessing the two-year-old offer for the disadvantaged and funding level 3 training for up to 45 practitioners.

Q150 **Chair:** What I am trying to understand is, how do you set the targets and how do you measure them, in a nutshell?

Nadhim Zahawi: The plan is set locally. We approve the plan and then we start working towards each plan. Where are we on that? Funding level 3 training for up to 45 practitioners to become speech and language champions. What we do is work with the board to say, "Where are we on that? Have we met this target?" I then sit with each official that is responsible for an Opportunity Area and say, "Where are we on these targets? How many have we met? Where is the progress? What is amber, what is red and what is green? Where is the red? What is the problem?" We have had some challenges in Blackpool that you have heard about as well. It is granular, Chair.

Q151 **Ian Mearns:** I am interested in the targets, Minister. Are there any uniform targets that cover all of the areas?

Nadhim Zahawi: A lot of the areas have targets around the early learning, which you have heard from Sue. I can certainly go through plan by plan, which I have here with me.

Sue Baldwin: I think nine of the Opportunity Areas have a target specifically about early years foundation stage—nine or eight, something like that. But 11 of them have a very specific priority around early years.

Q152 **Ian Mearns:** Were the targets set down before the partnership boards were established, or was it the partnership boards in conjunction with the DfE that established the targets for each individual area?

Hannah Streatfeild: It was in conjunction.

Q153 **Ian Mearns:** It was in conjunction. Given what the DfE already knew about each area, because that is why those areas were chosen, were there any sorts of targets where the DfE said, "That really has to be included before we start the programme"?

Nadhim Zahawi: If you follow the evidence, you are in a good place. The evidence would speak for itself. Where are the challenges in those areas? That would then shape the discussion. Then, obviously, the local



HOUSE OF COMMONS

expertise—back to Hannah’s point about flexing the NCS—would say, “Actually, we want to look at care leavers or children in care. We want to look at the specific challenges we have in our area.”

Q154 Ian Mearns: The targets, though, are an understanding of what the specific problems are in each area. At the end of a three-year programme, or measuring success during the three-year programme, how are you going to establish what positive outcomes have been achieved for individuals within that area that meet up with the original challenges?

Hannah Streatfeild: We have a monitoring framework. Each local area has a monitoring framework in place by target and then split into one of the activities that are happening within that target. There are clear progress indicators that are in place, which are linked obviously to the KPIs that are put in place in relation to the various contracts that are linked to the interventions. Areas and partnership boards—as SRO, I will look at these as well—will be measuring on a regular basis where we are against those progress indicators. If there are signs that we are off track, that means we can take robust action, or areas can take robust action, in terms of taking a different course.

For example, in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, they were doing some work around careers. The uptake from schools was not as high as we were expecting or would want in order to be able to meet the targets that Fenland and East Cambridgeshire had set. Having that early indication—and that link to capacity—as to why that was not taken up, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire partnership board have been looking at what they should be doing that meets that issue but flexes the plan that we had in place to ensure that we continue to make positive progress.

Q155 Ian Mearns: When we come to the end of programme, what test will you use to decide whether it has been a success or not?

Nadhim Zahawi: You obviously have things such as, “Have we met our targets—these hard targets?” Hopefully, we will be able to say, “Yes, we have done” Then you look at where the improvements are. We have already had early signs of improvement. In Derby, where the phonics programme has been supporting schools, you saw a 4% improvement on their 2017 phonics screening test outcome. What does that really mean? Measured against what? The national improvement is 2%, whereas Derby is double that⁵. In Ipswich, where there is a six-week Saturday intervention for 75 students at year 11 who were at risk of not achieving at least the 4 or 5 level in maths GCSE, we have had an average attainment improvement for those 75 of plus 1.3 grades over the six-week intervention on Saturdays.

⁵ The Department subsequently clarified that the national improvement in the Derby Local Authority is also 2% but that those involved in the Opportunity Areas programme saw an improvement of 4%.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

These are the sort of things. As Ben put it, this is not like another board with a bunch of people—worthies—patting each other on the back going, “Aren’t we brilliant for putting all this money out to these disadvantaged, poor people?”

Ian Mearns: Thank you very much.

Q156 **Chair:** Could I finally ask a question that my colleague Lucy Allan asked, about whether there were any plans to abolish Opportunity Areas? Could you just confirm whether there are or not?

Nadhim Zahawi: The Opportunity Area programme runs for three years. There are no plans to—

Chair: That sounds like when somebody says I have no plans to run for Tory leadership.

Nadhim Zahawi: I have no plans to run for Tory leadership, Chair. I promise you that.

Q157 **Chair:** You are probably about the only person in my party who is not running.

Ian Mearns: We heard Nick Gibb deny it the other day.

Chair: Yes, he did. What I want is a “Yes” or “No”. Are the Opportunity Areas going to be scrapped?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will do my utmost, strain every sinew, to convince Treasury that this is important work and we should carry on.

Q158 **Chair:** That is not an answer.

Nadhim Zahawi: It was a three-year programme. I think it could do with a more ambitious outlook because I think we are beginning to see some really good work coming through. The work your Committee is doing at the moment—

Q159 **Lucy Powell:** There are three years there, but you want it to be longer.

Nadhim Zahawi: I want it to be longer.

Q160 **Chair:** You would have no expectation that they will be continued after three years?

Nadhim Zahawi: We have an SR coming up, Chair, and like every other Minister I have to go, whether it is maintained nursery schools—

Lucy Powell: That is top of the list.

Chair: FE colleges.

Nadhim Zahawi: On Opportunity Areas, I need to make sure that I deliver the evidence. From the work that we are doing here, I am convinced that this infrastructure is the right infrastructure and is worth us continuing to invest in it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q161 **Chair:** I am just going to end on a completely different subject that applies to you, Ms Baldwin. We had the academies commissioner in last week about the supervision of academies, and it is relevant to my constituency as well. Could I just ask you: when these schools are taken over by different academies, what do you do to check due diligence and the financial acumen of the academy that is taking over the school?

Sue Baldwin: We go through a full process of assessing. I know the case that you are alluding to, and at the time we would go through with our ESFA—Education and Skills Funding Agency—colleagues and assess their finance situation. We would also go through and have a look at their governance arrangements, and look at the strength of the board—whether they have the capacity and capability to take on a school that will probably be in difficulty as opposed to a school that will bring capacity to that trust.

Q162 **Chair:** Were you aware that when the Harlow Aspire Academy, which looks after the most vulnerable pupils in our communities, was taken over by TBAP, TBAP had significant financial problems and the school had a £400,000 surplus, which has now gone because, according to the headteacher, it has been sucked into the rest of the academy chain?

Sue Baldwin: This is being reviewed and looked at right now. I know we have a meeting with yourself and Lord Agnew this week about all of that, so I cannot comment on the specifics at the moment.

Q163 **Chair:** You will be involved in it?

Sue Baldwin: Yes.

Q164 **Chair:** What I am trying to understand—because this does not just apply to Harlow; this is an issue that applies across the country—is what is the due diligence that the academies commissioners and the DfE do in terms of ensuring that if schools are taken over, they do not face these problems? Ofsted has just been into the Aspire Academy last week, and some of the school has been shut down and a lot of the teachers are off sick. What due diligence is done by you and your superiors to ensure that the academy chains that are taking over are not going to bring about these kinds of problems?

Sue Baldwin: Taking it away from the specifics, typically I would look at the financial situation of the trust, its recent history in terms of finance and its likely future around finance in terms of what it is looking at. I will be looking at whether or not it has any revenue and capital issues that it is dealing with at the time. I would look at their capacity in terms of their leadership to take on a school, and that would depend on whether or not they have recently taken on another school in difficulty.

Q165 **Chair:** Why was this allowed to happen? Why was the school allowed to join an academy chain? It is a school that looks after very disadvantaged and troubled children—a special school. Why on earth was it allowed to join an academy chain that had all these difficulties?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sue Baldwin: I cannot answer that in detail at this moment.

Q166 **Chair:** Are you meeting with the headteacher and the staff of the Aspire Academy to try to find out what has been going on?

Sue Baldwin: The headteacher is not well at the moment, so that would be very difficult for me to do.

Q167 **Chair:** She is going to meet me and Lord Agnew this week, but are you happy to meet with her?

Sue Baldwin: Yes, and the national commissioner has also agreed to meet with her, I believe.

Q168 **Chair:** Would you favour a rebrokering of the school to a different academy, which is what the headteacher and the staff would like?

Sue Baldwin: What I would like to do is to hear both sides of the story first before making any decisions on that process.

Q169 **Chair:** This has gone on for some months now, and clearly something has gone deeply wrong. It is not just an example in Harlow; it is an example that is happening across the country in some academy chains.

Sue Baldwin: Yes, but I am also aware—sorry, to cut across you, Chair—that that trust has another academy in my region that has performed really well from a very difficult starting point as well. I do need to have a look at both sides of the story to understand just exactly what did go wrong and what has gone wrong. That is the process that we are going through right now.

Q170 **Chair:** Could I ask you to set up a meeting with the headteacher to get their side of the story as to what has happened?

Sue Baldwin: Indeed.

Chair: Okay. Thank you all very much for—

Nadhim Zahawi: Could I just put on record, Chair, my thanks to your Committee for the work you did on exclusions. I know the Secretary of State referenced it as well when he made the statement on the Timpson review. We are very grateful for the work that your Committee does in holding us to account.

Chair: Thank you.