



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Education challenges facing children and young people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds](#), HC 963

Tuesday 15 March 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 15 March 2022.

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Apsana Begum; Miriam Cates; Tom Hunt; Kim Johnson; Ian Mearns.

Questions 71 - 147

Witness

I: Robin Walker MP, Minister of State for School Standards, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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Examination of witness

Witness: Robin Walker MP.

Q71 **Chair:** Good morning, Minister. Thank you very much for coming today. Just for the benefit of the tape and those watching on Parliament TV, could you kindly introduce yourself and your title?

Mr Robin Walker: I am Robin Walker, Minister of State for School Standards.

Q72 **Chair:** Thank you. You will be aware that yesterday in education questions in the House of Commons, I asked the Secretary of State about the draft UK Covid-19 inquiry terms of reference. Very unusually for him, I felt that his reply was sort of like Sir Humphrey on tranquillisers, because the draft inquiry just suggests the inquiry will look at “public health decision-making and its consequences” and “the restrictions on attendance at places of education”. As I said in the House of Commons, that is like calling a mortuary a negative patient output.

I am astonished that there is no mention of children. I am astonished that there is no mention of the impact on young people and their mental health, and what we are doing as a Committee is sending a letter to the chair of the Covid inquiry asking for a lot more to be done.

Do you agree that the inquiry should go much further and should consider specific preparations and the response made to educational issues and to children’s issues caused by the pandemic, such as, as I mentioned, mental health, lost learning, life chances and damage to children?

Mr Robin Walker: I think we all recognise the issues, and I think this Select Committee has already done a lot of work to air some of them. Undoubtedly, there are profound consequences of the pandemic for children. In fairness to the terms of reference—I don’t want to repeat a Sir Humphrey-ish line, particularly under your strictures—I think the crucial reason for all of that was lack of access to educational institutions, and children not being in school. I do think that is a fair point to look into, but it is very sensible for the Select Committee to write to the chair of the inquiry and raise those issues.

Chair: But not to mention children in the whole of that document—

Mr Robin Walker: It is implicit in restrictions on attendance at places of education because, of course, that is what has profoundly impacted children.

Q73 **Chair:** It wasn’t just that. For example, as my colleague Miriam Cates talks about, it had a big impact on babies. Families were not able to see midwives, and so on.

Mr Robin Walker: Having sat through lockdown with a two year-old at home, while expecting a baby through most of that time, I am entirely



sympathetic to the fact that this had a profound influence on children, whether they are at school or not.

Q74 **Chair:** There is no mention of children, babies or anything in this reference. It isn't just about restrictions on attendance at places of education. It seems like an afterthought that they have just thrown it in and, as usual—as so often throughout Covid—while everything is focused on the economy and health, children and young people are forgotten about.

Mr Robin Walker: As I hope you will recognise, the recovery has been profoundly important for this ministerial team. The focus on keeping children in education and supporting face-to-face education has been an absolutely top priority, and so I think we would welcome you writing to the chair of the inquiry in the terms that you have set out.

In fairness to the Secretary of State, obviously he is not in his role to set the terms of an inquiry, which will be looking into the work of Government when he is in his role to get on and deliver—

Chair: No, but he can advise.

Mr Robin Walker: But in what he is delivering, he is focusing on children being in school.

Chair: Hang on—he can give an opinion.

Mr Robin Walker: Of course he can.

Chair: He can give an opinion to the chair of that inquiry, which would make a difference.

Mr Robin Walker: I am sure there will be discussions, but I am sure your letter will carry at least equal weight. As I say, I think this Select Committee has done important work on unearthing some of the huge challenges for children of all ages that we have seen from the pandemic, so I welcome that intervention on your part.

Chair: You get the point.

Mr Robin Walker: I get the point, and I recognise it is a hugely important inquiry. It is right that it should look into the impact on children across the piece.

Q75 **Chair:** Thank you. That is very helpful. In fact, I think we should quote that in our letter to the chair of the inquiry—that the Minister says that it is right that it looks at the impact on children.

Can I move onto the catch-up programme, please? The figures that you mentioned and the Secretary of State mentioned—published by Randstad, as I understand it, on Friday—suggest that over 1 million young people have started on tutoring courses through the National Tutoring Programme. Of course, this is welcome, but there are some caveats. Some 311,000 of these starts were made in the previous



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academic year when the EEF was leading the rollout of the NTP. In total, only 720,000 starts have been made this academic year, according to the statistics. In the document that accompanies the statistics, Randstad says that one in six pupils are enrolled in multiple courses, so are therefore double counted in a number of starts on the school-led tutoring provision.

When Randstad appeared before the Committee—my colleague Ian Mearns was chairing, because I was away due to Covid—we asked to be provided with further data on the number of children accessing the National Tutoring Programme, which Randstad assured us that it would provide. But the figures published on the NTP take-up last week only tell us the number of starts under the National Tutoring Programme, so do you know how many pupils have benefited from the National Tutoring Programme?

Mr Robin Walker: At this stage, I cannot give a precise figure on that. As you say, I think there were 720,000 starts this year. That breaks down into 520,000 under the school-led route, 114,000 under the tuition partner route, and 74,000 under the academic mentor route.

In terms of the figures that have been published, that is an overall update on the number of starts. We do hope and we want to publish before the end of this month more detailed figures, including a regional breakdown, which is something that I know this Select Committee has long asked for. We are working through the data to make sure we can provide those figures at the earliest opportunity.

Q76 **Chair:** Just to go back to what I was saying, according to Randstad, one in six pupils are enrolled on multiple courses, so double counted in the number of starts in the school-led tutoring provision.

Mr Robin Walker: I think it is right that we give schools discretion over which pupils need catch-up support. For instance, if you have a tutoring session going on in literacy and a separate one going on in numeracy, it may well be that the same pupils, who might be the most disadvantaged pupils, could need to access both. Therefore, I don't think that is necessarily a problem if some of those same pupils who might need more support in catch-up are accessing more than one course. What we do want to ensure is that they are prioritised for pupils who need the most.

Q77 **Chair:** I don't have a problem with that—I think that is important—but the issue is about the data. When you talk about the number of people accessing this, the figures are not correct if the same pupils are accessing a number of courses.

Mr Robin Walker: What we have always aimed to do is to set a target for the number of courses started by individual pupils. I accept the point but—to go back to the example I just gave—if you have the same pupil taking a maths or numeracy course and an English or literacy course, in one sense that is double counting but there is still an educational benefit to both.



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Q78 **Chair:** No one is denying that. The big thing is the data, which is quite misleading in the way that it has been set out.

Have you made any assessment of the impact of Randstad's National Tutoring Programme? Do we know if it is reaching the right children and redressing the disadvantage gap? I ask that because the new figures suggest that just over a third of the promised 2 million courses of tutoring have been reached so far, even though we are half way through the academic year. You know that your own Department in its annual report rated the catch-up programme "critical/very likely" that the measures to address lost learning would be insufficient, and it stated that this was a sustained risk and the in-year direction was worsening. I am quoting your own Department's comments.

Mr Robin Walker: That was obviously quite some time ago that that was set out.

Chair: This was last year, in December.

Mr Robin Walker: Yes. We have taken a number of actions in order to address that, principally the acceleration and stepping up of the schools-led route, which has proved very popular. It has proved one of the key drivers of both demand and supply of tutors through the system. As you will have seen in the announcement that we made at the end of last week, we transferred £65 million to the schools-led route from the academic mentor and tuition partner route, which means we can continue that acceleration.

The other point I would make is that, clearly, in the first year of the programme, almost all of those 311,000 courses were delivered in the last term of the first year, because that is when schools were available to deliver them and it was also in the period running up to exams. We do think that there will be continued growth in the take-up of the programme and, as the Secretary of State said yesterday, he is confident we will hit the 2 million target. I share that confidence, partly because of the way in which we have addressed some of the challenges we have heard from the sector. That is both in some of the gaps that there were in the early days with tuition partners—

Q79 **Chair:** Is that 2 million genuine starts? As I say, it includes some of those children who are doing a number of courses.

Mr Robin Walker: The 2 million genuine starts may include some children who are doing more than one course. I am not saying it is 2 million individual children, but it is 2 million genuine starts.

Q80 **Chair:** There is clearly a problem with data, because we don't know how many disadvantaged pupils are accessing it. We don't know the outcomes from what you have said, and that to me is the crucial thing—whether the catch-up programme is working. If Randstad's delivery does not improve, will the Department for Education invoke the break clause in the contract?



Mr Robin Walker: We will look at all the options to make sure we have the most effective delivery in the next year of the programme. Of course, what we need to do in the meantime is to work with Randstad and with the tuition partners to make sure that the best offer is there for schools. We need to continue working directly with schools who have told us that they believe that they can use a significant proportion of the funding to deliver tuition in their classes.

Q81 **Chair:** What are the consequences for Randstad and the National Tutoring Programme if it fails to meet the 65% pupil premium target?

Mr Robin Walker: We are monitoring performance on that front all the time. We are having regular meetings with them and officials are monitoring their figures on a monthly basis, but what we want to ensure is that we have a strong offer here. We have both increased the number of tuition partners available, particularly in areas like the north-east where I think your Select Committee has highlighted that there were problems of supply in the past, and we have increased the scale of the schools-led route.

I was listening to your very fine interview on the “Today” programme the other day. The lady from a north-eastern MAT, who was on just before you, was actually praising the schools-led route and saying that worked much better for the schools that she represented. It is important that we listen to schools through this process, but it is also important that we listen to the tuition partners, some of whom have told us that they found difficulties in working with Randstad. Others have told us that they think the support that they get is good and works well. It is important that we work through—

Q82 **Chair:** You think that Randstad is doing a wonderful job?

Mr Robin Walker: I am not saying that, but I am saying we will continue to work with Randstad to make sure we can deliver this programme, and obviously we will look at all options when it comes to taking it forward in the coming years.

Q83 **Chair:** Finally, before I bring in my colleagues, I campaigned for the catch-up programme and I fundamentally believe in it. I also believe in tutoring groups, but I don’t think that Randstad is fit for purpose. I think the Government should break the contract. We also agreed last week in our Select Committee report that, basically, most of the money should be given to schools directly so that they spend it how they see fit. Then the Government could intervene and judge the schools and local authorities—judge the schools on the outcomes of those children. It would be given into one pot rather than the spaghetti junction of strands and funding streams and the bureaucracy that the schools have to go through.

Just so we understand, when are you going to publish the figures on the number of disadvantaged pupils enrolled and engaging on courses through the National Tutoring Programme, and will these include a breakdown of data in terms of regional access and the amount of pupils



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enrolling who are in receipt of the pupil premium or other measures that the Department for Education uses to measure deprivation and disadvantage?

Mr Robin Walker: As I said, we are working towards providing more detailed figures by the end of this month. We will want to make sure that those include the regional breakdown and that they include an indication of the number of pupils on pupil premium.

I would say that the one complexity with that is that, at the moment, through the schools-led route in particular, the money is allocated according to pupil premium cohorts, but we are giving the schools the flexibility to determine who they then use that funding with, and there is not necessarily a direct line of reporting that I am aware of that requires them to tell us how many of those pupils are pupil premium.

Therefore, I cannot guarantee to you that every element of the detail will be there but what I want to do is provide more of that data, provide it in greater granularity and include under those pillars, where we can do it, the proportion of pupils who are in receipt of pupil premium who are going to be reached.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring in my colleague Ian and anyone else who has questions on this.

Q84 **Ian Mearns:** Robin, I had the privilege of chairing the session when we had Randstad here to give evidence. I have to say, from my perspective, I thought the representative from Randstad was singularly ill-prepared to come to a Select Committee and answer questions about what Randstad was meant to be doing.

It was amazing how many questions were asked where the response was, "I am sorry, I don't have those figures to hand. We will let you know subsequently". Then of course we did not actually get much from Randstad subsequently. I think we got a page and half, which was very thin gruel in terms of answering the questions that we had been asking.

Two million starts is a laudable object but the point is: is it the right 2 million children? Are the right 2 million children getting the support that they need? I think that is a crucial part of the question about this whole programme. Are the right kids getting the support, or is it just going out in a scattergun approach to any kids? Of course, all kids will need some support, but some will need it more than others. Are the ones who need it more than others actually the ones who are getting that support?

Mr Robin Walker: My short answer is: yes, but we need to constantly work to make sure that that is better targeted. I gave an example earlier of where I think the Select Committee rightly highlighted gaps in the Midlands, the north-east and particularly with the tuition partner strand, where we then procured for more tuition partners to come on board, provided more support and listened to the schools who were telling us that they wanted more support through the schools-led route. I think that is a good example of where we can continue to iterate and do better.



It is important that we do not miss the fact that we have had satisfaction surveys from schools, in which 77% of schools said their programme was having a positive impact on pupils' attainment and 80% that it was building their confidence. There is a certain element of this where I think we have to sometimes decide, as a Department, that we cannot drive everything with a long lever from Whitehall and that it is right to trust schools to make decisions about how best to target the funding and the tuition support to the pupils who need it most.

What we have tried to do—and what Randstad were taken on board to do—was to work on the capacity piece, the accreditation of providers and providing that link with schools. We are still working very closely with them on the marketing to the schools in areas of higher need. That is very important as well. I recognise that particularly during the first half of this term, many schools were probably under too much pressure from staff absence to engage with a programme like this to the extent that we might have liked. Therefore, we need to keep up that job of marketing and getting the information out to them as to what is available.

I hope also that the announcement that we made last week with the extra £65 million for the schools-led route will be a wake-up call to those schools who have not been able to engage with this to date, to say that there is extra money available from that pot.

Q85 Ian Mearns: As the Schools Minister, given what you now know about what has happened and about the fact that in that first delivery phase, some places missed out and some children missed out quite dramatically, have you considered doing not only further catch-up programmes but follow-up catch-up programmes? It is almost like some youngsters will need even more intense programmes than others because they miss out initially.

Mr Robin Walker: That is also why I think it would be wrong in any way to prohibit some youngsters from taking more than one course under the tuition programme. We want to make sure that the support for them is there.

Ian Mearns: As long as it is the right children.

Mr Robin Walker: Of course, as long as it is the right children. It is important to recognise that NTP is one very important part of our catch-up work, but it is by no means the whole thing. We also have the recovery premium. That is continuing over this year and next. We want to make sure that schools are using those interventions to support pupils as well but, yes, we do need to make sure that where pupils have fallen behind and where perhaps they have not had the opportunity to start catching up yet, there is a pipeline of support available.

That is why I think it is important that both the broader recovery piece and NTP are multi-year programmes. These are not things we are just going to do as a one-off thing. Over time, what we also want to do is



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make sure that tutoring becomes an established part of the system. I think that something in perhaps more normal times could be one of the really good uses of pupil premium, which is also targeted support for the most disadvantaged pupils. That is something that we need to build in over time.

However, right now, where we are, the reason why we have this multi-year programme of recovery support is very much to address the point you just made: that children will be recovering at different rates. There is some good evidence from Renlearn about a degree of recovery, but of course there is more to do.

Q86 Ian Mearns: Lastly on this, given that we have had the experience of having Randstad in front of us, it is possibly incumbent upon the Department, if it is going to engage outside contractors, to explain to those outside contractors that they need to be prepared to come in front of a Committee of this nature and answer questions about the way in which they are spending public money. I am afraid to say, quite clearly, Randstad was not prepared.

Mr Robin Walker: I take that feedback on board, and I think obviously we want to make sure that you get the evidence and the information that you need from people giving evidence to you, so I shall certainly try to do that with any partners who I appoint.

Q87 Chair: One quick point: you said that 80% of schools say that the catch-up programme is working. That is brilliant, except for the fact that we know that there is close to a 95%-plus take-up in the south and a much lower take up—60%—in the north and in the east. There are five schools saying it is wonderful and loads of schools that are not able to do it properly. It is not a fair statistic. It is like saying, "Tractor production in the Soviet Union has gone up by 5 million percent this year but the fact that there is no grain is beside the point".

Mr Robin Walker: It is fair to ask schools who have taken part in the NTP to give feedback on it. If they were saying that they were not satisfied, I am sure the Select Committee would be taking a strong interest in that, but of course we want to make sure we reach those schools that haven't yet reached that.

Q88 Chair: In the north—the latest statistics we have—40% are not able to access it properly. Does that not frighten you?

Mr Robin Walker: That is what we are trying to overcome, as I say, with the marketing and with the focus on the schools-led route. We are trying to make sure that we can reach every school. We do think that there is something for every school in this National Tutoring Programme and we want to make sure that that reach is improved.

Q89 Ian Mearns: There is a problem in terms of logistics, and I have raised this point before. In some parts of the country, if you are trying to recruit tutors or you are also at the same time trying to recruit supply teachers—



during Covid, lots and lots of staff have been off and there has been staff absence and we have needed to recruit supply teachers—we are quite often fishing in the same pond.

Mr Robin Walker: I recognise that issue, and I have looked into this in some detail. It is not the case that everyone in tutoring needs to be a fully qualified teacher, and so there is quite substantial lack of overlap in terms of some of the people in that space. Of course, in any situation where you have a tight market, it is more difficult to recruit people. I do think it is important that we treble the number of tuition partner providers in the north-east, partly as a result of the feedback we had from the Select Committee. I think that shows the intent.

We also recognise that, as we have heard from schools and MATs, they value the schools-led route. Indeed, some of the tuition partners are providing quite a lot of support through the schools-led route. That is where high quality tuition partners can access the programme both through the tuition partners pillar and the schools-led route.

Q90 **Miriam Cates:** I have three questions—two brief ones to start with. First, the head teachers I have spoken to very much welcome the pay rises, but they want to know if they are fully funded, including on costs. If they are not, in combination with inflation and gas prices, they are going to have to lose staff to fund the pay rises.

Mr Robin Walker: As you know, overall, we are putting £4.5 billion into the school funding system this coming year. That is significantly above the inflation funding rise and we do think it can cover the cost of pay rises and a number of other costs.

On energy costs, we absolutely recognise that it is a pressure, but it is worth bearing in mind that it is less than 2% of schools' budgets. Therefore, while the increase is substantial, it is a smaller proportion of the school budgets. We usually talk about staffing being about 80% of school budgets. I have to say that in my area the schools have always told me it is between 85% and 90%, so it is a very substantial part of the schools' costs. It is important that we strike the right balance in terms of giving a well-deserved pay rise while also making sure we have something that is affordable over the long run.

Q91 **Miriam Cates:** Thank you very much. Secondly, schools have been working incredibly hard throughout the pandemic. They have been open. Head teachers have been doing an extraordinary job, not just in terms of education but in terms of wider support in the community. What I am hearing is that while they are still working flat out, some of the surrounding support services—whether that is CAMHS, social services, MARS or local authority support services—are still being told to work from home. They are refusing to come into school to support the schools, so the schools are still doing everything. I don't know whether that is local to Sheffield and Barnsley but I suspect it is wider than that. What powers do you and the Department have to encourage local authorities to get



their staff back into schools?

Mr Robin Walker: That is a very good question. I absolutely recognise the issue you raise. I think schools' staff have gone above and beyond to make sure that schools can be open and that they can support the pupils for whom they are responsible. I do not necessarily have a picture that the point you are making about councils is universal. I think it is something that we would certainly encourage councils to recognise—that we are now living with Covid, and that we need to make sure the support is there for schools and for education.

When it comes to the health piece, I found myself in great agreement with the speech you made the other day where you were saying mental health is hugely important in schools but it is not entirely for schools to sort out. I do think it is important that we have CAMHS and the health support to meet that. I know from my work as a constituency MP that that has been a long-running challenge.

I also know that the Department of Health is prioritising funding for that area, but it is vitally important that the support workers—whether they are speech and language therapists, mental health specialists or in other areas—are able to come into schools and support pupils and support the teachers who are there. That is certainly something I will reach out to colleagues and see if we can encourage further.

Q92 Miriam Cates: Thank you. Finally, I very much welcome the new political guidance that has been put out to schools. I completely agree that we should let children be children. We should not be pushing adult political agendas in schools. That is very, very important. In the guidance I think there are 19 worked examples to help teachers navigate some quite tricky issues, which is great: racism, different political systems, environmentalism. These kinds of issues do come up in schools.

However, what is conspicuous by its absence in those scenarios is any mention of the teaching of gender ideology, by which I mean schools teaching, against guidance, that there are more than two sexes; that you can change sex; and that if you are gender non-conforming it might mean that you are the opposite sex to what you are biologically.

I think this is particularly worrying in the context of the interim Cass review that came out last week, which was primarily about the gender identity services for children in a health context. It also mentions the fact that socially transitioning a child—as in changing their use of pronouns, changing their names—isn't a neutral act and does have serious consequences further down the line.

I know anecdotally, from parents who are writing to me about schools in my local area, that schools are transitioning pupils without their parents' knowledge. They are pumping this view that you can change sex. That you might be a different sex, when often these children are gay and lesbian, or they are autistic. Vulnerable children are over-represented. I think we have a serious issue here but we haven't even scratched the



surface.

Therefore, I suppose my question is two-fold: can we update the guidance to include how teachers should navigate this very difficult issue of gender ideology? Secondly, how can the Department investigate what really is happening in schools? At the moment, a lot of these reports are obviously anonymous and it is a very difficult area to navigate. It is a huge safeguarding issue because of the kinds of children that are being let down.

Mr Robin Walker: The first thing I would say is that schools should not be teaching ideology, regardless of in what space that is. I think we are pretty clear about that in the political impartiality guidance.

Miriam Cates: They are, and that is why this guidance is so apt.

Mr Robin Walker: Schools should be teaching facts and information in that respect. As you said, quite a lot of the allegations or suggestions here are anecdotal. It is important to get to the bottom of each individual issue. We want schools to be able to support pupils, including the small number of pupils who may have gender identity issues and may need support in that respect. It is important that if they approach members of staff, they can be signposted to the right advice and support—which will not always be people in their school, by the way. I think it is important to reflect on that.

We also need to make sure that issues around sex and gender and identity are taught in an age-appropriate way, listening to the concerns of parents. That is one of the responsibilities we have set out in our guidance around RSHE, so that schools engage in that. I recognise that there are some really complex legal issues to do with the Equality Act in this space and I know that there are concerns about protecting, for instance, single-sex spaces in some schools.

We are doing a piece of work with the Equality and Human Rights Commission to look into this space to see if we can provide any further guidance and support in this area. That will take some time because these are not straightforward and simple things, but it is important that we balance responsibility to protect the characteristics of sex with the protected characteristic of gender reassignment, which is also protected under the Equality Act, and we make sure that we address the concerns that parents may have in this space.

There have been some examples where parents have had concerns—those have been raised—where Ofsted has stepped in from a safeguarding perspective or an improvement perspective. It is important that we look at those and take the evidence from those.

With regard to the political impartiality guidance, it is very clear that what we are setting out is that there should never be an attempt to indoctrinate or impose a particular view on children. Equally, we do have to respect protected characteristics under the Equality Act. That is the



difficult area that schools are trying to navigate. I think we should be doing more as a Department to support them in that and I am very keen that we do that. That is why the Secretary of State undertaking to do this work with the Equality and Human Rights Commission is an important step forward on that.

Q93 Miriam Cates: I appreciate that. Going back to the Cass review, however, the point is that in the medical space—these are the reports so far—this is highly unregulated, and there is evidence of some serious safeguarding questions. Often, children are led to go to these clinics because they are told in school, either by visitors or through the materials that are used in classrooms, that the answer to some of their important teenage struggles is to change sex.

The DfE guidance is very clear. You cannot tell children that you can change sex, or that if you are gender-non-conforming, it might mean that you are of a different sex. That is against the guidance, and yet it is happening. For these other issues, because the Department knows that it is happening, we have set out some very helpful worked examples to help teachers navigate them. Why can we not add to that a worked example of what you do when you come across this issue?

I have seen some of the videos that are being used in schools, where they show a boy putting on nail varnish and the implication is that perhaps they are a girl, or a girl weightlifting, with the implication that perhaps they are a boy. These are the kinds of gender stereotypes that we did away with in the 1980s but are being brought back by this ideology, and it is an ideology; there is no basis in science. How are we going to get that into this guidance?

Mr Robin Walker: As I say, I think the political impartiality guidance is clear about not teaching ideology, and not teaching a particular point of view. The one thing I would pick you up on is you said that you are not supposed to teach pupils that they can change sex. You can do that, because you are supposed to teach LGBT content. You should not teach them that they should change sex.

Q94 Miriam Cates: No, hang on; biologically, you cannot change sex. In every cell in your body, you have sex chromosomes. You cannot change them. That is a biological fact. You can tell children that some people believe that you could have a different gender to the sex you are born with, but other people and science say something else. You cannot teach it as fact, and that is very clear in the guidance.

Mr Robin Walker: Okay. I made the mistake, which I should not have done, of confusing sex with gender in that respect. The point that I would make is we do need to talk about the world as it is. We need to talk about the fact that people do transition, that there are trans people, and that we should support them as a protected group under the Equality Act. We are not going to rule out people teaching about that. What we should be doing, though, is making sure that it is taught in an appropriate way and making sure that it is not encouraging something that would be medically



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difficult and could have implications for people's mental health. The balance we should strike there is about teaching the facts, teaching what we have set out in the RSHE curriculum, not teaching a particular ideology or a particular view. I am very clear on that.

I think we have set out sufficient examples in the political impartiality guidance to be clear on that, but I am happy to look at the Cass review to see if there is any further work that we can do. I do think that there is room for better guidance to support schools in their safeguarding responsibilities in this respect and in understanding the Equality Act. That is why we want to do this work with RSHE, and this is why I think it is important that we press ahead with it.

Q95 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Minister. I have a couple of questions on exams. What are you doing to ensure that GCSE and A-level examinations will take place this year? How will changes to examinations support students who were greatly impacted by the disruption of the pandemic?

Mr Robin Walker: Thank you for the question. It is very important that GCSE and A-level examinations do go ahead this year. I will be meeting Ofqual later today for ongoing work, and to talk about how we support those students and how we make sure that this series of examinations can go ahead effectively and with the right support in place.

In terms of the adaptations, you will be aware that grades will be based around the mid-point between 2021 and pre-pandemic grades for GCSEs and some A levels, with results therefore likely to be higher than pre-pandemic, providing a safety net for some of this year's students.

The package of measures, along with the exams, includes four elements: a choice of topics or content on which pupils will be assessed in English literature, history, ancient history and geography; in all other GCSEs and A levels that have exams, advance information about the focus of the content of the exams, which was published on 7 February; changes to some assessment requirements for practical assessments in some subjects to take account of public health measures that were in place; and allowing students to have access to support materials in the exam room for maths, combined science and physics.

Combined with the choice of content and the other measures, another thing that I think is important in the context of people still possibly suffering from Covid absence is spacing exams. Where we have multiple exams in the same subjects, we are having a 10-day space in between them to make sure that pupils have the best opportunity of being able to sit them.

We think that package will mean that we can go ahead with the exams and that we can do so in a fair way. Since taking on this job, many of the conversations that I have had with teachers have been very clear about the downsides of the teacher-assessed grades process. It is something



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that people recognise was necessary at the time we had it, during the height of the pandemic, but many teachers are very keen to move away from it to something that is independently assessed. That is something that will be welcomed by the system more generally. I think it sets us on a path to restoring independently assessed exams as the best way forward for most people.

Q96 Kim Johnson: We are almost at the end of March. When will schools and teachers find out what is going to happen and what support will be in place?

Mr Robin Walker: We made the announcement on the advance information and the spacing of exams on 7 February. We are continuing to work with Ofqual on the full detail of the delivery but the key information that people need is out there.

One other important point: this has come up from one of your colleagues on the Labour Back Benches. I am hearing anecdotally that some schools are doing a lot of work to make sure that they continue to gather evidence for teacher-assessed grades alongside the work that they are doing to prepare for exams. Obviously, we want that evidence to be available because we all know from the pandemic so far that we cannot necessarily predict what is going to happen. We want it to be available for support.

However, if schools have sufficient evidence, I want them to be able to bank that now. I want them to be able to put it in a drawer and focus on exam preparation rather than have to gather new information on teacher-assessed grades. It is quite important that we are clear. There is no requirement to gather new evidence on teacher-assessed grades next term. Clearly if people have a mock exam or something and they want to use that, they can, but there is no requirement on schools to continue to gather new evidence for teacher-assessed grades into next term. I want them to focus as much as possible on the exam preparation, the revision and perhaps the tuition as well that goes along with that, to make sure that pupils are as well-placed as possible to take those exams.

Q97 Kim Johnson: Working-class disadvantaged children have been adversely affected by the pandemic. What specialist support will be in place for those students?

Mr Robin Walker: That is why we invested in the catch-up programme, and the recovery premium in the National Tutoring Programme, as well as the underlying investment in the pupil premium, which goes in every year and has reached its highest level this year. All those elements of support are there. The advance information is designed to help all students to focus on their exam preparation but. Combined with things such as tuition support, I think that can be particularly valuable for the most disadvantaged students.

Q98 Kim Johnson: We have already heard this morning that the National



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Tutoring Programme is not hitting the students that most need it and they will be adversely affected.

Mr Robin Walker: I disagree with that characterisation. I think it is reaching them. A million sessions have been started under the National Tutoring Programme and have reached a lot of pupil-premium students.

Chair: That is back to tractor production in the Soviet Union again. We don't know how many of the students are disadvantaged yet.

Mr Robin Walker: I think we can be very clear that, particularly with the schools-led route, where it is allocated on the basis of pupil premium, it is going to be reaching an awful lot—

Chair: The million starts are not from the school-led routes.

Mr Robin Walker: No, but 500,000 are, and that is this year. That is money that is allocated to the schools according to disadvantage, and the schools then get to use it for the pupils they feel most need the catch-up support. That is there. The recovery premium is also allocated on that basis. There is extra funding for SEN pupils under these catch-up programmes. We think that all of these things are the right things to do to target catch-up to where it is most needed. We also think that it is in the interests of all pupils across the system to have a fair and credible system of independently assessed exams.

Q99 **Kim Johnson:** Unfortunately, we know that that has not been the situation in the last two years, don't we? There has been a massive disparity between privately educated students and those who go to state schools.

Mr Robin Walker: That is one of the reasons why it is a good thing to move away from a system that is not fully independent and assessed in the same way. I think teachers did a very good job on teacher-assessed grades in the circumstances that they were faced with, but the teaching profession recognises that that is not the best way forward and wants assessment that is genuinely independent and impartial.

The grading point is important here, too. We do recognise that this particular year group has been through a lot and has had significant disruption. Therefore, while we want to restore the long-term credibility of the grading system and return not just to 2019 levels—we call it that for shorthand—but to what was in place for the 10 years before 2019 in terms of consistent grading, we recognise that it would not be fair to do that in one year. That is why we have taken this two-year process.

We discussed a great deal and in detail with Ofqual its responsibility to maintain the credibility of the examination system, and Ofqual agrees with that. It is good that we have found consensus on that and can move forward with it. It will be to the benefit of disadvantaged pupils that we are able to take a slightly more generous approach to grading in the short term as we move towards a consistent approach in the longer term.



Q100 **Kim Johnson:** Will the Department be considering any kind of longitudinal study, looking at learning loss and the reduction in educational attainment in children adversely affected by the pandemic? We know that the educational attainment gap has widened for some of our most disadvantaged pupils.

Mr Robin Walker: We are looking very much at that. We are doing a piece of work with Renaissance Learning on learning loss across literacy and maths—different groups and pupils with different characteristics. We need to continue that work, but the exams and the assessments are an important part of providing the evidence base to scrutinise these things. That is one of the reasons why it is very important that they do go ahead this year. It is one of the reasons why we need more data.

Q101 **Chair:** Before I pass to Tom Hunt, can I make a general point about the exams? In essence, you have made the adaptation to the exam system to reflect the lost learning, so there are changes. You have made it slightly easier for most pupils.

Mr Robin Walker: I would say also to make sure that the limited time available to prepare for exams is best used.

Chair: Yes, but in essence what you are saying—to use a sporting analogy—is that, instead of running a 100-metre race, you run a 50-metre race, given what has gone on during Covid. Would that be correct?

Mr Robin Walker: No. It is certainly not anything like that quantum of reduction.

Q102 **Chair:** You are running an 80-metre race instead of a 100-metre race?

Mr Robin Walker: You are perhaps trying to hit a target.

Chair: No, I am asking that question because that the issue I have is this. Let's say you are running a 90-metre race—I don't mind what the figure is; I am trying to make an analogy—but everyone is still starting at the same starting point. Therefore, although the race may be 90 metres instead of 100 metres or 50 metres instead of 100 metres, everyone is starting at the same starting point, so that means that the disadvantaged pupils are starting at the same point. They have learned the least during the pandemic so they will struggle the most.

Then you say, "Well, we have the catch-up programme to deal with that" but we know there is very scant evidence that the catch-up programme is reaching the most disadvantaged. You are saying 500,000 pupils from the school-led part. That is a very small part, given that I think there are nearly 9 million-odd pupils in England.

Mr Robin Walker: That is on top of the recovery premium and on top of other areas of support for schools, and on top of the extra money that we have been spending on supporting teaching and the quality of teaching, which benefits the most disadvantaged pupils most.



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Q103 **Chair:** We don't know that because you do not have the data. We do not know how the catch-up programme is working for the disadvantaged. The disadvantaged will again, as always, be further disadvantaged even with the slightly more adapted exam system that you have developed.

Mr Robin Walker: There is no doubt that there has been an impact from the pandemic on disadvantaged children. I accept that, and I accept that some of the gains that we have made over the last eight years, where we had seen the gap between the performance of disadvantaged pupils and those with more advantages close substantially—

Chair: It was stalling pre-Covid.

Mr Robin Walker: Some of those gains have been lost. We want to make sure that that loss is as temporary as possible. That is why we are investing the £5 billion in recovery. It is why we are investing a substantial part of that in intervention and to support the teaching workforce, with £0.5 million to training opportunities for teachers, because we think there is very strong evidence that that does particularly benefit the most disadvantaged pupils and is, therefore, the right thing to do.

Chair: The advantage gap was stalling pre-Covid. The figures on the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and others, having done quite well for the first few years, suggest progress was stalling.

Mr Robin Walker: Yes, but there was significant progress up to 2018, certainly, and we need to ensure that we return to that trajectory and move away from the situation where there has been very substantial disruption from the pandemic.

Chair: We move on now to Tom Hunt, who has been waiting, as he does so often, very patiently.

Q104 **Tom Hunt:** Good morning, Minister. On minimum eligibility requirements for those who want to go to university, could I first make clear that it is either/or a minimum of two Es at A level and the equivalent of a C in maths and English? It is not both; it is one or the other.

Mr Robin Walker: I have to admit that this is an area of policy that is Michelle Donelan's rather than mine, so I do not have the information to hand, but I think the eligibility requirement is two Es and the English and maths requirements. I thought it was "and", but I may be wrong on that.

Q105 **Tom Hunt:** I am quite sympathetic to this move, but I thought it was "or". My concern would be if you were to get the equivalent of a C in English and maths but then an E and a U at A-Level, I wouldn't think that was sufficient to justify going to university, particularly if it was in an academic subject. On the other hand, thinking about it the other way—

Mr Robin Walker: You are right and I was wrong. I have found inspiration from my pack. Because this is not my bit of policy, I apologise



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for not having the answer to hand, but what is being consulted on—it is important that this is a consultation at this point—is the entry requirement including a grade 4 at GCSE or 2 Es at A-Level. That is what I have been told here.

Q106 **Tom Hunt:** Theoretically, it would be possible then to get the grade 4s in English and maths, but get lower than two Es and still meet the minimum eligibility requirements for going to university.

Mr Robin Walker: Apparently 1% of entrants currently will be affected by those eligibility criteria, so on each basis, with the grade 4 at GCSE, roughly 1% affected by a minimum entry requirement of two Es available.

Q107 **Tom Hunt:** There might be some of us who think perhaps therefore we go even further in toughening up the eligibility requirements, because there is a very legitimate question about whether somebody who is not doing that well at A-Levels should be thinking about doing academic study at university. Also, looking at it the other way in terms of GCSEs, there are a lot of people with learning disabilities and special educational needs who, when it gets to that GCSE level, often really struggle with either English or maths, but still have academic potential.

I say this as somebody who barely scraped a C at GCSE maths, but then ended up doing very well academically at university. I wouldn't want a situation where we are saying to somebody who maybe did not quite scrape that C in maths that academia is not for them, when it might be—while welcoming the general shift towards toughening up and raising the question, but not wanting unintended consequences for those with learning disabilities.

Mr Robin Walker: That is where fundamentally I think it is right to take a cautious approach, not just setting something out, but consulting on it and listening to views. I think you are right; there is nuance to this. We want to make sure that people are really benefiting from going to university if they are going, and they are not just spending time there. It is right to set a reasonable bar, but it is also right that we don't write people off from opportunities that they may have. I think it is right to be consulting on this.

From my perspective, what I want to see is schools encouraging people to think about all the opportunities that they might have, whether it is university, college, apprenticeships or going into work. I come from a family where both my parents left school, one at 15 and one at 16, so it is not necessarily the case that everyone needs to go to university. I certainly don't think we should be setting a particular target. From that perspective, I want to make sure that people are aware of all the opportunities out there.

Q108 **Tom Hunt:** I completely agree about the promotion of apprenticeships. It is just perhaps there is an argument to say that the onus should be slightly more on the A-Level results than the GCSEs, but with the "or" it



would mean that that young person who may get the D in maths or English, if they were to then go on and do really well at certain A-Levels, they could still go to university, so that would address that.

In terms of special educational needs and catch-up, we had a session with Randstad, which is insistent that there are high levels of SEND expertise with regard to the tutors. But then we had another session with practitioners—there was a head teacher from a special school and some others—and they were adamant that this was not the case.

As a Minister, what is your sense? Do you think when it comes to the catch-up there has been enough SEND expertise and specialism within those tutors as part of the catch-up programme, the national tutoring scheme? What is your sense about the extent to which those with learning disabilities may have fallen behind and to what extent has the catch-up programme made a positive difference in addressing that?

Mr Robin Walker: There is significant targeting within the programme to support SEND pupils. I have met with a number of the tuition partners, who are specialists in SEND, so I know there is that expertise there and some of them are working very effectively. You have heard evidence from people who have said they haven't had the right support and I recognise that may also have been a challenge in certain areas, particularly where perhaps the right tuition partner was not joined up. It is important that we look at that to see how we can do better and how we are making sure that the real expertise in that place does get to where it is needed.

Obviously one of the challenges here is that SEND covers many different needs and aspects. It may be that a tutor who is particularly good at dealing with children with autism might not be the best person to deal with children with other special needs, so we do need a range of providers in that space.

In terms of prioritising, one of the things that we did is we designed around 20% of the packages under the National Tutoring Programme to be smaller group sessions and those we particularly recommended should be directed towards children with special needs. The funding rate is more than double under the schools-led route, so £18 per pupil will be the funding rate for non-SEND pupils and £47 per pupil per hour for SEND. There are a number of things within the programme that are targeted specifically at SEND cohorts, but I think what we also need to do is get the data out there. I agree with the Chair of your Select Committee—and indeed my Secretary of State—that data in this process should be our friend. We need to get more of that out there and more of the information into the public domain to keep scrutinising that.

Q109 Tom Hunt: Thank you, Minister. I couldn't agree more about data. Of course, you will have seen in the Committee's catch-up report that data in regard to pupils with learning disabilities was something that was raised.

I want to pick up on Miriam's point earlier about political impartiality and



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the guidance that was published by the Government, which I welcome, but for me it is just to what extent it has sufficient teeth to make a positive difference. You will have seen that Ofsted recently downgraded an independent school. The London American School, I think it was, went from “outstanding” to “requires improvement” almost exclusively because of the serious concerns Ofsted had about the agenda being promoted within that school.

Sorry to put you on the spot, but do you sympathise with that judgment and would you foresee Ofsted making similar judgments when it comes to state schools? That is getting to the crux—to what extent the guidance has teeth.

Chair: I should make a declaration. The school I was in once hired a room at the American School for the theatre that they had, and I was the donkey in Don Quixote at about the age of 10.

Mr Robin Walker: That is the best declaration of interest I have heard in a while. Ofsted, as you know, is a separate independent entity and it is not for me to comment on its individual reports, but what I would say is that we put the guidance out there for a reason. It is important that schools do understand, and I think most schools have a good appreciation of this fact, that they don’t want to be teaching political views; they want to be teaching facts and inspiring students to take an interest in politics, but not telling them what to think. It is important that that guidance is out there. Of course, Ofsted will take account of that guidance and it is important that it is able to inspect schools and address the concerns of parents.

In that case, reading the report, it sounded to me like a lot of it was in response to genuine concerns held by parents. It is right in cases like that that it should be able to step in. That is all I will say. I do not think it is right for me to comment on the detail of the report. That is really a question for Ofsted, but it is important. Certainly, when I travel around visiting state schools, I think the vast majority of schools deal with these issues well. They don’t try to go into politically contentious territory, but they have said to us that they want more information and guidance and that is why we tried to provide more detailed guidance on that front.

Tom Hunt: Thank you very much, Minister.

Chair: I will bring in Ian and Kim on this, then we will move over to the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller inquiry.

Q110 **Ian Mearns:** Robin, your predecessor, Nick Gibb, launched what he called the flagship provider of teaching training at the Institute of Teaching. I understand that the preferred bidder is a consortium of four multi-academy trusts who cobbled together a company nine months ago to bid for the contract. On the shortlist there was another consortium of multi-academy trusts. There is no higher education institute involvement in either bid and universities, including Cambridge, are currently considering withdrawal from teacher training completely. Do you believe



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that we are likely to become a world leader in teacher education?

Chair: In a nutshell, please.

Mr Robin Walker: In a nutshell, I think the Institute of Teaching is a very exciting opportunity to provide a world leader in teacher education. We have a mixed system in this country where we have some fantastic higher education providers in teacher training and we have some very good school-based providers, too. Obviously, procurement processes are not something that I get involved in. They have to be run properly and independently by officials, so I cannot comment on that, but I think this is an opportunity and there is strength both in our universities and in schools-based teacher training, which we need to build on across the system.

Q111 **Ian Mearns:** Is it not of concern to you, though, that this process has caused so much uncertainty out there in the field that institutions such as Cambridge are seriously considering withdrawing from teacher training?

Mr Robin Walker: I would strongly encourage them not to do that. I think they have a lot to add. They have a fantastic academic track record and train a lot of very effective teachers. What we want to make sure of—with the ITT review and the work that is going on, on that front—is that we look at quality across the piece and we support both higher education and schools-based providers in making sure that they can deliver on what is already a requirement in the core content framework and get that through.

Part of that is also about stepping up the quality of mentoring and support for teachers, taking that first step on the golden thread that then follows into our early career and NPQ reforms and making sure that teachers benefit not just from the best start to their careers in terms of training, but also real support and CPD throughout their careers. I think that is a very worthwhile goal. The ITT review is just one element of that.

Q112 **Ian Mearns:** As the Minister for schools, do you think maybe you might have a role to play in reassuring the sector to try to get them to stick with what they have been doing and to continue providing that wide range of provision into the future?

Mr Robin Walker: Yes, that is a fair challenge. I have met with Oxford and Cambridge to talk to them about these reforms and reassure them. I think we are going to respect their academic independence and we don't want to tread on their toes in that respect. I will continue to meet with both universities and schools-led providers to support them in this process. I have to say, at the early stages of the review we had more applications for the first round than we were initially expecting. That is welcome and that includes Oxford University, but obviously we will want to see how it moves forward. We want to make sure that we have provision all over the country to make sure that we can meet the needs of what is a very important profession.



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Q113 **Kim Johnson:** Minister, just picking up on the point on political interference, somebody suggested to me—teachers in my constituency—that the Secretary of State for Education is involved in political interference by issuing the guidance and that was totally unnecessary because there is already a lot of guidance that informs a teacher what they can and cannot teach in schools. Would you agree with that?

Mr Robin Walker: No, I wouldn't. The Secretary of State for Education is a politician, but it is his responsibility, I think, to listen to the profession. We have done that and we have issued guidance, partly because it was asked for.

Q114 **Chair:** We are going to move now to the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller inquiry. In the previous session you talked about attainment and the disadvantage gap. Why is it that, on average, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils are almost three years behind white pupils at GCSE level? What is your Department doing to specifically focus on their relatively low educational attainment?

Mr Robin Walker: I think this inquiry is useful in highlighting some of the challenges that this particular group faces and some of the concerning statistics, to be honest, around attainment. You highlight GCSE levels. I think it is fair to reflect that that is through school levels. It is a group that is underperforming at key stage 2 as well as at key stage 4. It is a group—and I think this is core to this issue—who have lower attendance. I think it is very important that across the whole piece, for all groups, we need to set a high bar, a high ambition for attendance in school because that does benefit all pupils and it benefits pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There are a range of complex and interwoven factors that influence Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils' attainment, including socioeconomic factors. Some have suggested the fear of bullying and prejudice and potentially some cultural factors in terms of intergenerational—

Chair: I get all that. We have been studying the reasons in our inquiry. What I want to get from you is what you are going to do about it.

Mr Robin Walker: The first thing is to look at attendance across the piece. We discussed previously the work that we are doing with the attendance alliance, some of the excellent work the Children's Commissioner has been doing in this space and learning from some of the good practice that I think we have seen in some schools at reaching out to the local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community and engaging them and supporting attendance in that space.

Also, we need to look at intergenerational literacy as a challenge. There is money in the adult education budget to support adult literacy, but at the moment I think this is a community that isn't being effectively engaged on that. There is more that we could do on that front because I think that is very important. Part of it is also to show that we take the concerns of



the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, where they have those concerns, seriously. We are spending money on anti-bullying activities, including some specific work targeted towards that community, because it is right that they should not have to be concerned about their children being in schools. That is one of the things that may in turn affect attendance.

Q115 Apsana Begum: Good morning, Minister. I want to pick up on the point that you just made about the anti-bullying initiatives. If we look at the exclusion rates, Gypsy and Roma pupils had the highest temporary and permanent exclusion rates in 2018 and 2019. How are schools being monitored to ensure that exclusion processes are being followed correctly and fairly? When you mentioned funding in terms of anti-bullying initiatives, it is persistent and disruptive behaviour and measures around that, for which these pupils are being excluded themselves.

Mr Robin Walker: It is a good point. Exclusion is clearly a concern. As you say, it is the highest rate of permanent exclusions, at 0.24%, and of suspensions, at around 15%, for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community. We think that having strong cultures of good behaviour in schools helps to reduce the risk of suspensions and exclusions and helps to create an environment in which pupils from all backgrounds can feel safe and comfortable and can thrive.

To your point about persistent disruption, I think there is a concern that this is often a two-way process—that this is not necessarily just a child who is creating disruption. There can be tension between those children and others in the school and they then potentially go down that route. A school with a strong behaviour policy can manage that, deal with it and take earlier intervention to avoid the escalation to the types of suspensions and permanent exclusions that we have seen in this space too often.

We think it is right to back head teachers in having those policies, but our statutory guidance is clear that all schools should consider what extra support might be needed to identify and address the needs of children from groups with protected characteristics. That includes Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, who currently face a disproportionately high rate of exclusion. It is important we look at that.

Among this group there is also a higher rate of special needs. The work that we are doing on the SEND Green Paper will be important in making sure the right support is there in the right place for that area as well.

Q116 Apsana Begum: You mentioned the early intervention and the guidance. You are absolutely right in terms of schools trying to also identify whether there are any causes and intervene early in order to reduce the need for a subsequent exclusion. We had Pauline Anderson, who is part of the expert panel on the Timpson review on exclusions, who spoke about the lack of implementation after the review itself. She used the example of when she was director of learning at Derby City Council, when it did work



around tackling high exclusion rates. That process involved schools coming in front of a panel of head teachers to say what they were doing and what real steps they were taking to avoid high exclusion rates.

Specifically, how are schools being monitored on those early intervention steps that you say is in the guidance? It is the guidance, but how is it being implemented and how are schools being monitored on that?

Mr Robin Walker: The monitoring of schools is a process led by Ofsted. One of the things that it is very focused on at the moment, quite rightly, is working to target and highlight any examples of off-rolling, which is illegal and wrong and is one of the risks. As we set a high bar, quite rightly, on permanent exclusions, one of the concerns is that some schools in some places may have tried to exclude people by the back door, effectively through off-rolling. I think it is right that Ofsted has targeted that.

We have also strengthened the “Teacher misconduct: the prohibition of teachers” advice to directly reference off-rolling as a behaviour that is likely to be considered incompatible with being a teacher. That means that the TRA can bar people who are found to have been involved in off-rolling. It is important that we do take these steps, but more broadly as well, it is also about—and I think part of that is for us in the Department—setting the culture, about having behaviour cultures in schools that can provide a safe place for children of all communities and making sure that there is that understanding of the type of interventions that can make a difference and stop escalation of some of the issues that perhaps this community has seen too much of in the past.

Q117 **Apsana Begum:** I have a follow-up question on digital exclusion itself. In a report by Friends, Families and Travellers, one in five Gypsy and Traveller participants were found to have never used the internet, compared to one in 10 of the general population; and 38% of Gypsy and Travellers had a household internet connection, but that compared to 86% of the general population. Those figures are quite stark. Obviously, additional exclusion has an impact on the educational progress of people from these communities, but what measures are being considered specifically to support these communities, particularly with the relatively limited IT access?

Mr Robin Walker: I have precisely the same figures that you have on the rates of digital exclusion in these communities, and they are a concern. The measures that we have taken are around providing laptops, tablets, connections and dongles to students across the piece, and particularly to disadvantaged students. That is likely to be a higher proportion—I think 40% of people in the GRT community are on pupil premium and, therefore, count as disadvantaged. Some 100,000 wireless routers have been given out to pupils without a connection at home. I don’t have a specific breakdown within that as to what has been given to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.



Q118 **Chair:** Is there a breakdown available that you could send us?

Mr Robin Walker: No, because we wouldn't collate ethnic data on that information. It was given out on the basis of disadvantage rather than on the basis of targeting specific groups. We have also seen some good examples of where schools with a particularly large Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community have undertaken targeted work to support them. For instance, the St Andrew's Church of England school in north Somerset provided personalised paper packs of work to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students who weren't able to access online resources.

Chair: They are nice examples, but that is not across the board, I am sure.

Q119 **Apsana Begum:** When we took evidence from organisations from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, one of the things that came up was the policing Bill and the potential impact of measures such as trespassing provisions and measures in the Bill itself. Are you concerned about the impact of some of the provisions in the policing Bill on the GRT community and access to education itself?

Mr Robin Walker: No, because I think the policing Bill is about making sure that the police have the powers they need to enforce the law on private property. I think the GRT community understand the need to obey the law and act within the law. What we want to ensure is that they are supported and where they do travel—and it is only a small proportion of the GRT community who do live a travelling lifestyle nowadays—they have access to the right sites to go to. It is not right that people should be occupying private property and damaging it, in many cases. It is right that there should be proper legal powers for the police to deal with those issues, whatever the background of those people.

Q120 **Kim Johnson:** Minister, at a previous session we heard some worrying concerns about the levels of bullying and racism experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, and a particular report found that 67% had experienced it directly from teachers. Can you explain why there is no statutory guidance for teachers to report incidents of racism and bullying? People who attended the session said that that was withdrawn from schools some years ago.

Mr Robin Walker: First of all, we are absolutely committed to supporting the schools to prevent and tackle all forms of bullying. As I mentioned earlier, we are providing around £1.1 million of funding to five anti-bullying organisations to support schools.

Kim Johnson: Can we just go back to the statutory guidance?

Mr Robin Walker: On the statutory guidance, while we strongly recommend and encourage schools to record and report bullying, there is not and never has been any legal requirement on schools to record and report particular incidents of bullying. Current advice is that schools should develop their own approaches on monitoring bullying and exercise



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their own judgment as to what will work best with pupils. All schools are required by law to have a behaviour policy with measures to tackle bullying among pupils and they are held to account for their effectiveness through Ofsted.

One important thing in here, with the new inspection framework from Ofsted, is that I think there was a specific challenge previously, but some schools felt that if they recorded incidents of bullying, it would be held against them because it would show that they had a problem with bullying. That has been addressed specifically in the new inspection framework, which particularly commends and encourages inspectors to look at what schools are doing to tackle acknowledged problems, rather than to judge them on the basis of whether they have a problem or not.

That is an important distinction, and I think an important change, which will encourage better reporting of these things, but there has not been a requirement that was withdrawn, in that respect. There has never been a statutory requirement on this. We absolutely do encourage schools to keep a record of bullying and what they are doing about it, so that is something Ofsted can engage with and reflect on when it comes to inspect.

Q121 Kim Johnson: What plans are there to widen the curriculum to better reflect the history of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and more diverse communities?

Mr Robin Walker: There is a lot of scope within the curriculum, and particularly in the history curriculum, to teach about local history and about the contribution of communities to the country and to an area. We can pick out cultural figures from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community like Charlie Chaplin or Tracey Emin and talk about them in art or in media, so there are opportunities to do this.

I do have some good examples of schools that are choosing as part of their local history to teach about the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community in their area. For instance, Bransgore Church of England Primary School in Hampshire stocks books with reference to Gypsy Roma culture and has arranged for visits to go and see traditional New Forest traditions and craft.

Q122 Kim Johnson: Should that be widened though, Minister, to all schools that don't have Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, so that everybody has an understanding of the levels of diversity and not particularly in one area?

Mr Robin Walker: I think it is important that schools have flexibility to teach both what is relevant to their pupils but, also, what is a reflection of the diversity of the UK as a whole. That is why I have commented previously on welcoming schools in very white areas of Durham teaching about Black History Month, but I think we need to be proportionate. We cannot just fill the entire curriculum with a focus on particular groups. We



need to make sure that schools reflect the benefits of the diversity we have in this country and the contribution of different communities.

Of course, where a school has a particularly strong connection with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community and has a number of pupils from that community, it will be right for them to include content about that in their teaching of, for instance, local history.

Q123 Miriam Cates: One of the things we heard from witnesses was that a contributing factor to lower achievement from GRT children is parents who have difficulty in supporting them with their education, whether that is because they have had a bad experience at school themselves or because they have had no experience in school themselves. We know how important parental support is. We heard from one witness—a teaching assistant in a school in Ipswich who was himself a member of the Roma community—who was doing amazing work with parents, teaching them about the system itself, what was expected of them and what was expected of their children. I think that even included regular coffee mornings, and it seemed to me a brilliant example of good practice.

What is the Department doing to look at examples of good practice, and how are you going to help roll these things out to support parents to support their children's learning?

Mr Robin Walker: This is a very important area and one of the things that hopefully we can take from this inquiry and do some more work on. I mentioned a couple of the areas of good practice we picked up on already. I think your one in Ipswich is another good example and worth looking into. Part of this is around how we can support people on the attendance piece. I know the Chair of the Select Committee is very keen for us to get on with looking at attendance mentoring. One of the potential opportunities of that would be engagement with families who are furthest away from school, which may include the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community.

Part of it is also around literacy and support for adult education, and support for parents in that respect. There is a real challenge where children are remotely or home educated or absent from school for long periods of time. If they are in a household that doesn't have the literacy to support their learning, it is much more challenging. In that respect, the statutory register for children not in school will help us to identify where help is needed. We want to work with local authorities and local colleges to try to make sure that those people are reached out to and given the support that they need.

That will be an important culture change, and it is important we take that opportunity to reach more people. I will be honest: as a Department, we do not think about policy generally in terms of how we target this group or that group. We think about policy in terms of how we can set out the best attainment for children across the piece and how we can support the



school system to deliver most effectively for disadvantage and to give every child the opportunity to succeed. Within that, we definitely need to look at localised interventions and good practice—which I think your inquiry will help to highlight—in terms of how we can best support people who are furthest away from engaging with education.

Miriam Cates: A kind of outreach approach.

Mr Robin Walker: Yes.

Q124 **Miriam Cates:** Following on from that, one of the ways of helping families to get engaged in the system is to use the early years settings. What can the Department do to encourage families in the GRT community to use funded places to get involved in the system early and give their children the best chance of integrating when it comes to school?

Mr Robin Walker: Again, this is a big opportunity. The early years can make a crucial difference, making sure that the right support is there. The figures I have say that 34% of Gypsy Roma and 39% of Irish Traveller four and five-year-olds meet the expected standard in development at the end of early years foundation stage. That compares to 71% of four and five-year-olds across the piece, so clearly there is a gap there to make up.

We think that the family hubs can help with this in terms of the outreach work that they can support. Obviously, that will set up hubs that are designed to welcome all types of families and services within a network, which will be accessible in several ways, but will include outreach services, which I think will be beneficial for this community in particular.

We are working with the National Centre for Family Hubs, which is being run by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, and it is going to publish best practice guidance on access and inclusion, including for GRT families, later this year. That is an opportunity to take this further.

Then there is work that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is doing, where it has a funded pilot working in a number of areas around the country to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. We will be working very closely with it to make sure we learn from that and see if there are useful takeaways from that or things that we could be doing together in the future.

Miriam Cates: Brilliant, thank you.

Q125 **Tom Hunt:** In our first session we had many different people giving evidence. We had some from Ipswich from a Roma community who, as Miriam has drawn attention to, are doing some great work. However, we had some other panellists as well and there seemed to be a slight disagreement. There was a sense that there were some cultural issues perhaps within the community, perceptions towards education and attendance that may be contributing towards these disparities when it



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comes to school performance, but then others were saying it was more that racism was the key driver.

It is interesting, the stat that around 67% of those from the community in question have experienced some kind of racism or bullying. It would be very interesting to compare, because we know racism is a problem in schools for lots of different groups. It would be interesting to get a sense of how that 67% compares with other groups. When we look at the different groups, we know that the other community who are really the next lowest achievers are white working-class, other than the group in question we are looking at.

There are other ethnic minorities who no doubt, sadly, probably continue to experience racism at school, but it has not stopped them academically achieving a lot. For me, that is a key question: to what extent is racism a key driver of this issue? To me personally, it seems it is perhaps more culture; it seems to be more of the attitude. It would be interesting to know whether there are any data on that, in terms of instances of racism in schools. Are some groups more prone to it than others?

My second question would be this point to do with teaching Gypsy and Roma history and culture in schools. Personally, if there is not a significant community, I don't necessarily know what the point would be. I think there is a danger when we do too much of that that it is not particularly good for integration. There should be an element of teaching shared values and shared stories because most of the Roma in Ipswich are based in Ipswich now forever. They are not mobile; they are in houses. Yes, we want to be sensitive to their culture, but we also want to promote integration.

Mr Robin Walker: An important part of what we try to do through the British values element of the curriculum is very much to teach that we are a diverse country that comes from multiple different cultures, and lots of cultures have made a contribution to our country, but we celebrate being British. I think that is a good thing to do. I think it is absolutely right to try to bring people together.

To this point about a sort of anti-school culture, I suspect people will say that that cuts both ways. As Miriam pointed out, there is perhaps a previous generation who might have had some very bad experiences at school and decided to disengage from it and by their own lights are doing all right, so why cannot the next generation do that? I think one of the things we have to show is that there is real opportunity in education for everyone.

It is important to recognise that, although we have some concerning statistics about the performance of this group overall, there are some Gypsy Roma pupils who attain well and who engage well in school, have good attendance records and end up getting good grades out of it and doing well. You have heard from some of them before your Select Committee, some people who have ended up in teaching and making a



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real difference. It is important that we emphasise that and emphasise the positive.

With regard to your point about incidents of racism, we do not collect that data, so that is not something where I can hand you a dossier of data, but it is something obviously that Ofsted would look at across the piece thematically in terms of its wider look at behaviour.

Q126 Tom Hunt: I want to get to the nub of the question, because we did hear from a lot of people the other week that they thought that racism was a driver of this disparity in educational outcomes. I find that difficult to align. For example, look at the fact that there is, sadly, a depressingly large amount of Islamophobia in today's society, but when we look at how pupils of Muslim faith perform at school, it is pretty well compared with white kids from underprivileged backgrounds. If racism was the key issue, surely then that—

Mr Robin Walker: I think there is a responsibility on all of us, for us as a Department, but also for schools and local authorities, to engage different communities in the way that will most effectively get them supporting the education piece. As you say, I think there has been some very good work done with some particular communities. There is clearly more work to do in this space, but it is also about setting high expectations. I do not think we should ever be apologetic for setting high expectations both in terms of attendance and attainment for children across the piece.

What we absolutely need to do is try to make sure that the support is there to overcome specific disadvantages that people may have. We have talked about digital exclusion today and we have talked about the pupil premium and the fact that within the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, probably 40% are currently taking pupil premium. I suspect—I have no direct evidence to prove this—that may be an underestimate in terms of the number of people who are eligible, because I suspect also there may be a cultural stigma against asking for help on free school meals and things. I know that is an issue in many rural areas and has been a long-term challenge for the school system in getting pupil premium numbers up. That is something we need to look at and make sure that we can support schools.

There are some good examples of good practice. Miriam referred to this earlier. Where we can highlight those—I have heard of Crays Hill Primary School in Essex providing training regarding the effective inclusion of Traveller pupils into school life.

Chair: Yes, there are loads of examples, but it is not across the board.

Mr Robin Walker: Yes, sure.

Q127 Tom Hunt: One final question. We were delighted to have two members of the Ipswich Roma community at the first session. The two individuals who came here have worked within primary schools in Ipswich with a



high Roma population. They have worked as translators and they have worked on challenging some of those cultural issues to do with perceptions of education. They have made some great progress in doing that, but often the funding isn't there for schools to employ those sort of individuals who make such a positive difference.

I guess one of their asks would be more support for people such as themselves, who I have seen do some very good work when it comes to promoting integration, improving attitudes towards education, doing the coffee mornings around computer literacy and also careers advice as well, and making that link between doing well at school and getting a good job at the end of it, which many of us assume is there, but it is perhaps not always clear to everyone.

Mr Robin Walker: Yes. I think definitely that is something that we need to engage pupils and families with, and we do need to make sure that the funding is there to support the system in general. One of the big things that I am constantly focusing on is the NFF reforms, making sure that we have a fair funding system, to make sure that the huge amount of money that we do put into education is effectively distributed across the piece.

Chair: Are you finished, Tom?

Tom Hunt: I think Suffolk is one of those areas that is a bit of a loser when it comes to the funding formula.

Mr Robin Walker: It is getting better.

Q128 **Ian Mearns:** What are you doing to ensure that all children from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community receive a suitable education, wherever they receive it? There is obviously a particular focus on those who are home educated.

Mr Robin Walker: Yes, and that comes back to the broader piece. I think the Select Committee has rightly highlighted the need to be able to target support better to home-educated children. That is why we do need to get on with getting the statutory register into place. That is about keeping the records of who is electively home educated but also, crucially, providing the duty on local authorities to provide support where it is wanted. I understand that there are already powers for local authorities to determine to what extent home education is suitable.

I think we heard in education questions yesterday a question around what can be done where there is low parental literacy. Joining that up with the statutory register and the duty to assist will be helpful then in being able to get the right support both to pupils and parents where there may be lower parental literacy. It is a very important systemic change that we start to think about this more proactively. I know that is something that has been driven by this Select Committee.

Q129 **Ian Mearns:** I think in order for us to do that effectively across the board, across all local authorities—local authorities have lost a significant



amount of central resource over the last 10 to 15 years. Obviously, that has been driven by a number of different factors: the number of schools that have become academies and the local authorities have lost a commensurate amount of money. That means that the economies of scale within local authorities do not necessarily provide for the appropriate levels of staff to do this effectively in terms of supporting those families.

We have seen a fairly large growth in the numbers of youngsters who are being home educated. Is that something that you are going to focus on? It seems to me that local authority staff will pick on low-hanging fruit and it may well be that the children from Gypsy and Traveller might be somewhere down the pecking order.

Mr Robin Walker: It is an important point you make. One of the things we want to set out in our upcoming White Paper is more clearly where we think the future role of local authorities is in the education piece. A lot of that is going to be around championing the interests of the child and around their responsibilities with regard to making sure that children are being properly educated.

With regard to the four proposals from the children not in school consultation, that places a duty on local authorities to maintain a register on children not at school; it places a duty on parents of children who are not in school to submit information to that register; it places a duty on proprietors of non-school settings to provide information to the register of children who receive a substantive part of their education there; and it places a duty on local authorities to provide support to home-educating families, where it is requested. Those things are an important part of the scaffolding, if you like, to make sure we get this working.

Absolutely, we will need to make sure, with our colleagues at DLUHC, that the local authorities are appropriately resourced to do the job we are asking, but it is not always a question of more people and more money. In a recent visit to Rotherham, I saw what they had done on the attendance front. They had gone from a situation in which they had a very large number of attendance officers who were handing out fines to families, with very little effect on actual attendance, to having a smaller targeted number working much more closely with schools and with the MATs being much more effective at providing the interventions that really support quality attendance through an early intervention approach. It can be done, and I think it is about making sure that we work with local authorities to make sure they have a clear understanding of what their responsibilities are and then the right resources on it.

Q130 **Ian Mearns:** The thing is that even within the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, there are some significant diversity issues. Certainly, in my own location we have quite a number of eastern European families from a Roma background, where they have come from a culture whereby they and their families were actively discouraged from attending school. They regard it as a sort of culture shock that we are



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actively encouraging them to get the children into school. It is a very different atmosphere for them, so that is one thing to bear in mind.

You mentioned the register, Minister. When is the register going to be with us?

Mr Robin Walker: As soon as the usual channels give me a Bill that I can bring it forward in. I want to do it as soon as possible, so I do want to get on with that.

Chair: Is that this year?

Q131 **Ian Mearns:** Do we need it to be in the Queen's Speech or is it something you can do without that?

Mr Robin Walker: It is a Bill that we want to bring forward and certainly it would be my intention to bring it forward this year. However, it is not within my gift to determine the timing of legislation, but I think it is important. That will be as part of a wider Schools Bill, but this is certainly one of the key elements of it that I want to get on with.

Q132 **Chair:** Will it be part of the Schools Bill or will it be a separate piece of legislation?

Mr Robin Walker: It will be part of the Schools Bill.

Q133 **Chair:** When is that coming through?

Mr Robin Walker: As soon as I can get permission to bring it forward.

Q134 **Chair:** I have two or three questions to end with. Again, please do not do the soviet tractor production thing.

Mr Robin Walker: I will try not to.

Chair: It is a £1 million education programme that has gone in to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. What are the outcomes of that £1 million programme? What has happened to the kids? Has it made a difference or not?

Mr Robin Walker: I do have some information on that and, without being too soviet tractor production with statistics, I will try to run you through some headlines. It is across a number of education areas: Bradford, central Bedfordshire, Essex, Hillingdon, Surrey, and Open Doors Education and Training. The pilot areas are supporting parents and pupils with reading in the early years, engagement in early education, supporting transition points, raising awareness of cultural and educational issues for teachers and schools and building confidence in both schools and individual leaders, supporting engagement with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents, delivering work experience and basic skills projects, and providing a NEET programme for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. In terms of the outcomes—

Q135 **Chair:** The outcomes in terms of educational attainment and



employment—what has happened?

Mr Robin Walker: I think the honest answer is it is too early to say. This has started but it hasn't finished, so it has not been fully assessed yet. We will work with DLUHC on the assessment. We know it has reached significant numbers of children: 600 Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people have been supported by Open Doors Education and Training alone in 150 schools.

Chair: That is about input, so if we can get back to soviet tractor production.

Mr Robin Walker: You asked me for some specific outcomes. Those are specific points where people have been reached by it.

Q136 **Chair:** The Secretary of State says he is the data-driven Secretary of State, which I welcome, and then you keep saying, "We don't collect the data. We don't have details of the outcomes". Surely you should be collecting the data.

Mr Robin Walker: To be clear, this is DLUHC—

Chair: On Tom's point about bullying and racism, for example, he made the point that other groups are subject to this, sadly—Islamophobia, Jewish antisemitism, all these kinds of things. Why on earth don't you collect the data?

Mr Robin Walker: I think we have to be very careful here. We should collect data on the things that we are responsible for that we are driving, like the NTP where we are driving a programme forward. We need to be very careful about collecting data on allegations of something that may have occurred or may not have, depending on whose side of the thing you believe. On a project like this, absolutely, data will be collected and an assessment will be made, but that needs to be done by DLUHC, which is the Department that is sponsoring it.

Q137 **Chair:** This is the catch-22, if you have read the book or seen the movie, because you do not know if there are allegations until you collect the data, so which is it?

Mr Robin Walker: I also think we need to be clear about what our expectations are of teachers and the teaching workforce in this respect. It is right to have a behaviour policy. It is right to deal with things properly. Do we want teachers to be spending all their time logging individual accusations or complaints? I am not sure we do. I think we want them to be able to focus on teaching the class, making sure that they are creating a positive culture there, and dealing with serious incidents. Do we want to be creating a huge workload there in logging everything that has happened? I am not sure that that is necessarily the right approach. I do think that on this, though, where you are asking for data, you need to speak to DLUHC, which is the sponsoring Department behind that £1 million programme.



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Q138 **Chair:** It is £1 million of taxpayers' money, isn't it?

Mr Robin Walker: Indeed.

Chair: So you guys should know what is going on.

Mr Robin Walker: It is £1 million, for which communities Ministers are responsible. You should feel free, when they have completed that work and when they have conducted their assessment, to get them in front of the Committee to give you evidence on it.

Chair: We think that you should know about it.

Mr Robin Walker: I know what I have been told by my other Government Department on this, and that is what I have been trying to pass on to you.

Q139 **Chair:** I am going to bring in Tom, who has a question, but we have been talking about attendance specifically in terms of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. In our Committee, we have been talking a lot about so-called ghost children: over 100,000 children not yet mostly returned to school since the schools opened. The Children's Commissioner—so it is not just us—estimated that 124,000 children were severely absent last term. It is an eye-watering increase. She has been going on about this quite a lot and published a report. As I understand it, the greatest practical support that you have done has amounted to the appointment of five attendance advisers. What are you doing to get these children back into school, because the catch-up programme is not even reaching them? The Centre for Social Justice suggests that 13,000 of those children are in year 11, an exam year. Schools in the most disadvantaged areas are 10 times more likely to have a whole class missing.

Mr Robin Walker: This is absolutely why the Secretary of State and I have both set this as a key priority for the Department. We set up the attendance alliance, bringing in the Children's Commissioner, Amanda Spielman and others to work together.

Q140 **Chair:** You set up a committee?

Mr Robin Walker: No, we have also commissioned specific work from that group. We have some of the leading experts who have driven down persistent absence in some of the schools in the north-east of England—for instance, the Northern Education Trust—sharing best practice across the piece, making sure that they are demonstrating what can be done—

Chair: It is getting worse. This has gone on for months. I started on this last summer. It has got worse.

Mr Robin Walker: To be fair, if you look at the latest attendance statistics, it is getting significantly better. What we have seen is a return in the latest attendance statistics to pre-pandemic levels of attendance in many places. We want to continue to drive this forward, and we need to make sure, as we deal with it, that we are not just targeting the easy bit,



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which is the basic attendance in schools, but we are really targeting the persistent and severe absence.

In that respect, Chair, I think what you have said to me many times, and I have entirely taken on board, is that we need to look at attendance mentoring. We need to pilot that effectively. I have set the Department to work on doing that, but we need to have the evidence of what works. That is also why the example I gave earlier of Rotherham is something we have recently consulted on: new guidance for schools and for local authorities around attendance so that they can improve their approach based on what has been shown to work in those circumstances.

Q141 **Chair:** You said it is getting better, but the number of children severely absent more than doubled compared to 2021, from 60,244 to 124,000.

Mr Robin Walker: We have been through a pandemic in which a number of children have been out of school for lengthy periods of time. What we focus on and what we are looking at on a weekly basis are the latest figures for attendance in school, in terms of both staff and pupil presence, and those are improving.

Q142 **Chair:** What are the latest figures for those who have been most persistently absent in terms of the improvement?

Mr Robin Walker: I don't have those to hand but I would be happy to write to you with an update on persistent absence.

Q143 **Chair:** Why not appoint a significant amount of attendance practitioners to work with schools and local authorities? I am not saying this is the view of the Committee, but the CSJ has suggested 2,000. That would be 13 per county, where they would work with the parents, the schools and the local authorities to get these persistently absent children back into school.

Mr Robin Walker: It is that push factor from outside schools. I think that there is important work for schools to do on attendance and there is also important work for the broader piece to do. This is the approach that we want to pilot in terms of attendance mentoring, looking at it. We do need the evidence of a proper pilot to make sure that it works and it is an effective intervention. You would not want me spending money on something that is a good idea but is not necessarily evidenced. It is something that I want to make sure the Department can get on—

Q144 **Chair:** This has gone on since last summer, so it is coming on for a year. The longer you have your committees in Whitehall and do your pilots, the longer these kids are going to be out of school.

Mr Robin Walker: Attendance is a key priority. It is something that, as I say, we are monitoring closely. We have consulted on that new guidance for local authorities. We have appointed attendance advisers to work with MATs and local authorities in supporting them in this respect. We are trying to make sure that we set a higher expectation in terms of



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attendance. It is absolutely crucial, as you say with regard to catch-up, that children are in school wherever possible. We need to support both the school system and local authorities in playing their part to do that.

Q145 **Chair:** Personally, I think if there are 124,000 children not in school or missing school, it should be the number one priority to get these kids back into school.

Mr Robin Walker: That is why we brought together the alliance to focus on that priority, to make sure that we are driving forward the approach in that space.

Q146 **Tom Hunt:** I will go back to that point about recording the data on allegations of racism and bullying. I do sympathise with your point that they are not necessarily proven. I am somebody who has been very active in saying the whole practice of getting police to report non-crime hate incidents is very distorting. It is not something that I agree with particularly because often it is third parties making the allegations.

I guess in this case, even if it is an allegation, it does still matter because if that is felt by the young person in question, it will impact their performance at school and their confidence and everything else. The main reason we are having this discussion today is because—in getting towards the end of the second session—obviously the Committee will have its deliberations after this, but I suspect personally that the key driver here is more culture and attitudes to education and everything else. We did have a session only a few weeks ago where significant players in supporting the sector were very strong in saying that the main issue was racism. That is why we are having the discussion today. Therefore, I do think it is important we collect that data, but I am coming to the conclusion it probably is culture.

Mr Robin Walker: Creating the right culture in which schools are welcoming places and support all communities is very important. In the behaviour policy we should not be setting low standards for behaviour. We should be setting high standards for behaviour that make children feel comfortable and safe in schools and take very seriously allegations of bullying. All I am saying is that I want teachers to be taking those seriously. I want them to be acting on them and I want them to be reassuring pupils who may have been in any way bullied.

I am not necessarily sure that what we should be doing from the Department is specifying that we want them to be spending lots of time logging all that, recording it and reporting it back. I think it is important that we set a high aspiration for behaviour and attendance across the whole of education and for children from all backgrounds, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.

Q147 **Chair:** I realise that this is not your brief, and it is fine if you do not want to comment. Yesterday in the House of Commons I raised this issue with an investigation done by Theo Usherwood from LBC in terms of some academics in some of our leading universities, like Edinburgh, Leeds and



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Leicester, who seem to be spouting pretty hardcore pro-Putin propaganda on social media. I wondered if you could clarify what the Government Minister's response is going to be to investigate that and what the Government intend to do.

Mr Robin Walker: I have spoken to Michelle Donelan on this. I recognise the reports as quoted are deeply disturbing. Universities are independent, autonomous organisations and should decide what to investigate and whether to investigate. The views as reported are deeply offensive and completely lacking in academic integrity. Michelle has convened the HE taskforce with representatives across the sector to discuss how we can best work together on a range of issues arising from the awful events in Ukraine. She has said that she will speak to the vice-chancellors of the universities that have been mentioned.

Obviously, we have only heard what has been reported. I think it would be right to make sure that we understand the context around this before making any judgment, but it is something that we certainly take seriously.

Chair: Thank you. I really appreciate it. This has been sustained questioning for almost two hours, so it is much appreciated. Thank you for all that you do—I know it is pretty tough at this time—and also your Department and all the officials. It is appreciated by everybody.

Mr Robin Walker: Thank you very much.