

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Accountability hearings, HC 262

Tuesday 6 October 2020

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Apsana Begum; Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; David Simmonds.

Questions 231 - 329

Witnesses

[I](#): Anne Longfield OBE, Children's Commissioner for England.

[II](#): Michelle Donelan MP, Minister of State for Universities.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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Examination of Witness

Witness: Anne Longfield.

Q231 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Good morning to the Children's Commissioner, thank you for coming today. We are slightly delayed.

I want to begin by personally putting on record a tribute to you and the work you have done during the lockdown. While some other educational bodies found it very difficult, or were even in hibernation during the lockdown—I am talking about some Government-related bodies—I think that you were out there day after day campaigning for children to get back to school, highlighting the safeguarding, the mental health and the vulnerabilities children were facing. You stuck your neck out quite early on in terms of what was happening to children. I think your legacy will be remembered for what you have done during the lockdown. Thousands of children and their families will be thankful for your campaigning over the past few months. During the lockdown you were very vocal about the effect of school closures on vulnerable children and the need to get pupils back to the classroom and learning again. As I just mentioned, I welcomed your intervention.

In one of your early briefing papers, you said that 60,000 children in the UK lack any internet connectivity at home, while 700,000 are in homes lacking any laptops or tablets, whatever it may be. How effective do you think the Government's laptop scheme was, and what more should be done to ensure that every child is equipped to learn from home in the event of further school closures?

Anne Longfield: Thank you for your kind comments. I did feel, throughout the whole of the lockdown period and the pandemic to date, that this is actually what I am for. From the earliest days, there was a sense that not only had the lockdown put a stark spotlight on the vulnerabilities and shortage of resources of so many families. I felt children were being overlooked, so I felt I needed to intervene.

Part of those resources that you would hope families would have at hand—but so many did not—was, of course, about their ability to work from home. Some of it was about the tech or the broadband, as you say, and some of it was just about desk space. We know that 40% of disadvantaged young families just do not have anywhere to work. Having the ability to be able to work from home was crucial for poorer students not only to try to keep up but to continue to learn, too.

There was some gap between the start of lockdown and the laptop scheme being introduced. I welcomed the laptop scheme when it was introduced. We know it was possible to go to only about 37% of children who needed it in the first instance. There were some delays in getting that out and now there is a second, and indeed third, phase. I would have preferred it if it was quicker, I would have preferred it if it got out there faster. I would have preferred it if it threw its net much wider in



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terms of who needed it, not just to children with social workers and not just to year 10 children but to all disadvantaged children.

What we now know is that if you leave it to settle, if you like, in terms of how children are able to respond to any time they cannot be in school, there are going to be huge differences in children's experience. You had some children online from 9 am to 4 pm with their whole classroom programme almost as normal, and then you had others who did not have a desk, did not have a laptop and could not even start that process. One more thing is that there is something in between, where a lot of kids did a lot of work on their phones. I do not think that is what we were all dreaming of when—

Q232 Chair: Do you think the Government should give vouchers to the schools, where they can access laptops or SIM cards locally, which would be a lot quicker—perhaps even go down to their Currys? Do you think, rather than just certain years, everyone who does not have a computer at home, or WiFi or whatever, should be funded?

Anne Longfield: As part of equipping kids in the next phase for any potential time they are out of school, or indeed if a school has to close—which I hope it does not—I would like all children who do not have any tech at home to have the ability to be able to get some. I would like it to be wide, to all children who need it, and it seems to me that the best way to get it out is to give that ability, those funds, to schools to get them out there. We know they will be able to do that faster, they will know which kids they are and they will be able to administrate it.

Q233 Chair: The NFER estimate that pupils are, on average, three months behind in their learning because of the lockdown, and half thought that the learning gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has widened since the previous year.

Two questions. You have spoken a lot about the catch-up fund. I have campaigned, as have other members of the Committee. Do you think it is being spent in the right way, or should it be focused on disadvantaged children in disadvantaged areas?

Anne Longfield: I would like all schools to focus it on disadvantaged children, because I think they have the most distance to catch up. In the first instance, this is an amount of money that is welcome. I pushed for this, as did many others, so I was very pleased to see it. However, it is just the start. My concern is that to actually get the right programmes and the right support in place requires bandwidth that I think an awful lot of senior staff in schools just do not have at the moment. I have talked to senior school leaders who tell me they are out there moving furniture and covering classes for other teachers. There is so much going on at the moment to keep children in school and ensure they get education safely that I think it is very difficult for senior staff to be able to organise the kind of breadth of support that children need.



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I think it is a start. I think it will need to continue for beyond one year. It needs to look at beyond the classroom support for the core subjects. It needs to also start looking at family support, at pastoral care and tying support around the school. Head teachers say this is the part that has been so crucial over the last three months and six months as schools close. They now know how important pastoral care is, as so many of them did before.

Q234 **Chair:** Can I gently ask you to be very concise with your answers because of the broadcasting restrictions?

Anne Longfield: Of course.

Q235 **Chair:** In a nutshell, how would you reduce the huge differences in attainment between disadvantaged groups and their better-off peers? You have highlighted it, but what are the solutions?

Anne Longfield: The solutions I would look at would be starting early, not waiting till 16 when we can see it so starkly, so starting in the early years. We know that almost a third of children are not reaching their development goals, with 13% not reaching half. There is the signal for us. We need speech and language support before children start school and, once they are into school, inclusive education so we can ensure that children are kept in school rather than marginalised and falling out of school. This is the kind of wraparound support for schools that head teachers have now seen is so essential, support that works with families and works to engage with children before school, after school and, of course, during school holidays as well.

Q236 **Chair:** Can I ask you about free school meals? We know from UNICEF in 2017 that approximately 10% of children under 15 are living in severely food-insecure households. You will be aware of Marcus Rashford's endorsement of the National Food Strategy recommendations. What is your estimation, in data, of child food hunger in the UK, and what do you think are the best solutions to deal with this?

Anne Longfield: The figures are stark, and they are figures that my Office has analysed. This comes down to poverty in the end, because having no food in the cupboard is a grim reality of not having the income into the household you need.

To let you have some statistics, the best prevalence estimate we have is that 2 million children aged nought to 14 live in food insecurity. There are 1.5 million children eligible for free school meals, and only 1.1 million are known to be receiving them. Over the summer, 350,000 children were living in a family where someone was forced to skip a meal because there was not enough food and 249,000 children were living in families that accessed foodbanks, which we know have kept so many families going over this period. All of those things, of course, are a response to the fact that these families are living in poverty and that, of course, needs tackling on a much broader basis.



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I give tribute to Marcus Rashford and everything he has done. I am grateful for the Chancellor's interventions on free school meals so far, but they have tended to be quite incremental. They are quite disparate. What we need is a comprehensive package to eradicate food poverty, to ensure that children do not have to live with the day-to-day burden of not knowing if there is any food coming on to the table. From the children I speak to, they know that is a burden that is heavy to take. They know the burden on their families. They know the insecurity that means, and it dashes any sense of confidence or planning for the future.

Q237 Chair: What you are saying, Anne, is you want a long-term food strategy rather than a lot of disparate programmes from different Government Departments, is that right?

Anne Longfield: Absolutely. What we need is a clear, joined-up plan to reduce poverty and, as part of that, to reduce food poverty, rather than seeing it coming in two or three weeks' time and having to respond. Families need that confidence to be able to plan for the future. This would be a really bold move to show that we cared and recognised the experience of these children, and we wanted to level up and ensure those children got the support they need.

Q238 Chair: Thank you. A final question before I go to my colleagues. A series of freedom of information requests by the Safeguarding Alliance—I should declare it is an organisation that is partially based in my constituency of Harlow—revealed a serious legal loophole whereby a convicted criminal or sex offender can change their name by deed poll relatively inexpensively. Although the Sexual Offences Act 2003 places the onus of reporting name changes on the convicted sex offender or criminal, that often is not done and this has allowed sex offenders to slip under the radar with a new alias, posing a significant risk to vulnerable children. The Bichard inquiry highlighted concerns around name changes in a serious case review, but I understand little action has been taken.

Are you aware of this loophole, and do you think there are wider systemic issues of safeguarding that need addressing?

Anne Longfield: What we know, of course, is that those who want to target children, get hold of them, will do anything to do so. I do not know about this loophole in detail. It is something I will take away, and I will report back to you in terms of both what I find and also what we do about it.

Chair: Thank you. Perhaps maybe even meet with the Safeguarding Alliance, if you are able to. This issue has been in the newspapers quite a bit over the past few months.

Q239 Fleur Anderson: Following up on what you said earlier about the provision of laptops, I was in a primary school yesterday where they were talking about the need for laptops for the future, with moves towards plans for if we have to go into lockdown again and long-term provision. They were saying there is inconsistency locally between different schools



and their access to laptops.

You were talking about providing finance for schools to give those laptops, but it is about deciding who the disadvantaged children are in the whole area and who should get the top priority for receiving them. Do you think there is a role there for local authorities to look at digital capacity and disadvantage all together in an area? Which do you think is the best provider to make sure we give what can be very costly provision to the children who need it most?

Chair: In a nutshell, please, Anne.

Anne Longfield: One of the things we have developed over the last four years that really has come to fruition in a local context lately is our index of child vulnerability and need. That identifies all the different indicators of vulnerability, one of those being about access to the internet and broadband. That is the kind of information and data that I think local authorities and their partners should be looking at, to identify the scale and then to work with local partners within schools to identify how many children in each of those schools need support.

Q240 **Tom Hunt:** I echo Rob's comments about your role at the start of the pandemic, drawing attention to the fate of vulnerable children. That was incredibly important, and I certainly think it will be a huge legacy for you and was a priceless intervention.

Yesterday I took part in an event about teacher recruitment and retention. We spoke in detail about recruitment and retention of the best teachers in disadvantaged schools. It seems that is more important than ever right now, to try to get the best teachers, the brightest teachers, into the right schools and working with the most-disadvantaged kids to help with this catch-up.

Have you any ideas about how this can best be done, particularly with regards to maybe a specific financial incentive to try to direct teachers into the schools where they are needed the most, and also looking at the kinds of pressures they are under in those sorts of schools and how, perhaps, those pressures could be alleviated slightly?

Anne Longfield: A couple of years ago we undertook a piece of work about growing up in the north and found that in the most-disadvantaged areas, especially the entrenched disadvantaged areas, there were schools that were performing less well and also had the most difficulty in attracting very good teachers.

What you can see in London—where 20 years ago you had schools that were some of the poorest in the country and that are now the leading schools in the country in terms of areas of disadvantage—what works is incentives for teachers, wrapping support packages around the school and the injection of cash within those areas as well. Also needed is that bigger drive, that this is a strategic mission, if you like, which has clear objectives and is backed up by a clear framework.



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These things are very difficult for individual schools to tackle by themselves. There is a real role for the regional school commissioners. After this pandemic, we have to think again about their role, which has to be broader and has to be about improving quality.

Also, education needs to look at the improvement mechanisms within health, for example, where it is quite normal to have improvement teams working around specific subject areas. That is not the case in the same way in schools. We have to get into place these kinds of national programmes that are able to be delivered locally in a way that really supports them.

Q241 **Jonathan Gullis:** Commissioner, it is always a pleasure to speak to you. May I say thank you as well, echoing Rob and Tom's comments, for all your work? You recently said that children should be exempt from the rule of six, which was a fine intervention.

My big fear with home schooling is that if parents move from one local authority area to the next, unless that child is registered with a local GP, they are effectively off the grid, so to speak, and could be missed in the system. What do you think needs to change in the system of home schooling to ensure we can safeguard children and ensure that the parents or carers who are in charge of that child's learning are acting in an appropriate and responsible way?

Anne Longfield: I undertook an investigation into this about 18 months ago because I was really worried about that increase—50,000 kids, a 60% increase. The recommendations I put forward were for a compulsory register of children who are being home schooled. I know some people do not like that idea but in other countries, in Jersey for instance, it is absolutely normal; also a requirement for parents to notify the local authority if they move areas so that they can be tracked. The deal with that, I think, is that they have to get more support, both at the time when they are considering home schooling, to see if it really is the right result for them, and on an ongoing basis. The register was agreed. There is a commitment from the DfE for that compulsory register, but we have not yet seen it emerge. That is something we need to see and are waiting for.

Q242 **Chair:** Very quickly, and following Jonathan's question, should there be stronger inspection of children who are home educated, whether it is by Ofsted or by the local authorities?

Anne Longfield: Yes, indeed. What I recommended was that there should be at least a once a year, if not once a term, inspection. Again, in Jersey this is very normal, it is absolutely part of the deal for home education.

Q243 **Ian Mearns:** Anne, the Office of the Children's Commissioner had a fairly extensive tailored review 18 months ago. The review concluded that the Office was providing value for money but made recommendations to further strengthen its governance operations and impact. What progress



have you made on the recommendations?

Anne Longfield: It was actually what they call a light-touch review because they deemed we were responsibly delivering. It was a good review; it came out backing us. There were some minor issues in there, which were around the kind of information we put on the website and a minor issue about some minutes from the advisory group and also from our audit and risk commission. There were recommendations about the breadth of information we made public, and the recommendations have all been implemented

Q244 **Ian Mearns:** In your previous answers, Anne, you talked about laptops and tablets, and this is a supplementary on that topic. How close are we to solving this massive problem? It is not just about children having access to a device, and many still do not, but is also about the connectivity within the household and having the room to use a device in a quiet place in order to get on with work. How far are we away from solving all of that so that youngsters from the most-disadvantaged backgrounds, if the need comes, can actually access education in their own home setting?

Anne Longfield: I do not think we are yet at the point where we can feel that the job is done in any way. I think the recognition it is needed and the devices that have gone out there have helped, they are important steps. Also I think the PM's commitment to say that schools will stay open, they will be the last to close and the first to open, is really important. We want to keep the kids in school for this reason.

Actually it is about more than laptops; it is about their home working environment and also about the teaching online. I welcome moves for schools to teach online as standard, and I know that is what lots of head teachers would say they are preparing to do in any case.

This is something that has not gone away. It is something that we have to hold very close as our test of whether we can close years or groups from school. However, we do so knowing that some children just will not have the home environment they need, no matter how many laptops we give out to enable them to do so. We have to make sure that if there is any closure in the future, vulnerable children, and absolutely as many of those as possible, have to be in school.

Q245 **Ian Mearns:** Anne, in one of your previous answers you talked about the aftermath of the London challenge, in terms of the resources that were available that brought on so many of the poor and most-disadvantaged London schools. Would you be advocating a London-style challenge approach for other parts of England, including the north?

Anne Longfield: Yes, I have been talking about that for some time and recommending that from the Growing up North report—a London-style challenge, as in the ingredients of what that means, but delivered in the north in response to the context. What we do not want is to plan a London challenge in the north and expect it to be exactly the same. It



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has to be led by the north. From everything I see, the north wants that to happen. You have that real swell of both local authorities and corporate interest in making this work, but that kind of investment is absolutely needed.

Q246 Ian Mearns: An area of opportunity that was highlighted by the review of your Office was the potential for your Office to communicate even more directly with children, for example on the website, in print, on television and via social media. How have you addressed this, and how many children and young people are aware of the Office and its role?

Anne Longfield: I cannot tell you how many are aware of the role because I have not done that sort of data. What I can tell you is that children's engagement is something that plays across everything we do.

One of the most important things, one of the things I am really proud of, over the recent couple of years, has been setting up a digital platform for children in care, IMO, In My Opinion. It is the first digital platform. It is populated and written by children, and it is their views and opinions that are in there. We know that is something that has not been there before and that is something I am really, really proud of.

As for wider interventions, one of the greatest sellers, if you like, or the greatest downloads was our children's guide to coronavirus. That was downloaded tens of thousands of times. I felt it was really important to get those messages directly, and we have also done a children's back-to-school guide as well, which again has had lots of interest and downloads.

Q247 Ian Mearns: You have pre-empted my question. On the last figures we saw, the guide had been downloaded about 40,000 times, but 40,000 hardly scratches the surface when it comes to the number of youngsters out there. There was a recent survey done by Parentkind—not recent, it was before the summer recess—with support from the teaching unions, which had something like a quarter of a million hits. Even that, in itself, is not enough. How are you going to beef that up, getting the access and response rates built up?

Anne Longfield: Those 40,000 downloads were not necessarily per child. You would expect schools, charities and other groups to be downloading and disseminating those as well, as would be the case for many other kinds of publications. For instance, when we have produced work for children on the digital world, an early piece of work about terms and conditions had many, many downloads—I cannot think of the exact number, but thousands of downloads—but they went to schools. We put it out as a test. It went to schools and it was used within the classroom. You know it is working when children come up to you and talk about what they have been doing in terms of terms and conditions.

It is an important part of the job. It is one where there is much more to do to get to every child out there. However, certainly by working with



other partners and working with intermediaries and talking directly to children themselves, it is something that—

Chair: Jonathan Gullis, can you do a quick one, please? I want to bring in Apsana.

Q248 **Jonathan Gullis:** Indeed, Chair. Commissioner, we know around 200,000 children have no access to connectivity at all and 27% of lower-income families do not use the internet. While it is very important that we get technology to young people, do you not agree that there is a digital divide and that we need a digital catch-up scheme to help better educate them in the use of the internet and the use of technology? Otherwise we are just giving out things that do not have a purpose in that household.

Anne Longfield: Completely. I see that the catch-up programme needs to be about how we use this precious tech and how we use it positively. Most kids will have some kind of smartphone now at a frighteningly young age. For those who do not have it—and children in care are one of those at several points along the way—then it starts to show in terms of that divide between those who are able to socialise online and those who are not.

However, this really important use of tech for education purposes needs to be absolutely part of that catch-up support for children and also to help them and their families make the most of it.

Q249 **Apsana Begum:** My question is about the powers of the Office. Last year, when you attended an oral evidence session, you were asked whether additional powers of instruction should be given to the Office of the Children's Commissioner. A year on, what are your thoughts on that now? Do you really feel that the powers of your Office are sufficient to meet the challenges, or would you seek your successor to have further powers?

Anne Longfield: I am never going to say no to powers of instruction. This is part of, I suppose, one of the challenges with this role. You have powers around gathering data and powers around entry. You see and know so much more because of this role, but actually you cannot make anyone do anything other than by presenting that evidence in a robust way, persuading and taking people with you to an extent.

The powers are really important. They have been strengthened over recent years, and certainly the power of data gathering is one that I think is really, really important and powerful. However, I do think it can be broadened. The power around consultation is one that has been a moot point over recent weeks in terms of whether we are consulted on issues around disadvantaged children or children in care. In Jersey, they have the power to undertake more formal investigations, which I do not have but which is something that would be of benefit.

The wider question of instruction, yes, of course, but this is very much about highlighting these issues, bringing it to the attention of those who



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are making decisions and policy—bringing it to the attention of Parliament. A big slice of my statutory responsibility is around Parliament. I am not going to be here in a year's time, but this Committee will be and Parliament will be. I would love Parliament to put the needs of disadvantaged children absolutely top of their list.

Chair: Thank you. It is something we try to do as a Committee. We focus on addressing social injustice in education and left-behind groups of children.

Q250 **Apsana Begum:** Your role covers representing young people from birth up to the age of 18, but also includes children with special education needs. In the last five years, what concerns do you have in terms of those children who are obviously facing serious challenges growing up in this pandemic?

Anne Longfield: Some of this has been brought to me in so many aspects of the work, and we work with other organisations, including the Disabled Children's Partnership, in terms of really getting to the nub of what some of the issues and concerns are for those children. I have seen how those children will often struggle in school. We know they are more likely to be excluded and marginalised from school. I have been worried about them being off-rolled from school. I have been worried about the kind of support those families would get and, over recent weeks, how some of that support has not been available for those children when they have been out of school during lockdown.

Parents have told me they have struggled to get the support they need during lockdown, and that they are worried about reintroducing their children back into school because they do not think the support is there. I am glad to say that the numbers are holding up quite well in terms of children being back in school, so I hope that is not the case. Access to education, access to support and assessment around education, health and care plans, support for children with special educational needs who are not eligible for an education plan or indeed those children who are getting high levels of high-cost support but ones that the parents do not feel are meeting their needs and are of variable quality, are all the areas that I have been shining the light on.

Apsana Begum: I have serious concerns about the area of SEND in particular at local authority level and how that is going to have an impact, especially in this pandemic, but I welcome your comments on that, thank you.

Chair: Thank you. That has been acknowledged by the Children's Commissioner in the past on briefings and notes.

Q251 **Tom Hunt:** You touched upon this in another Select Committee to which you gave evidence recently. It is to do with county lines and vulnerable children and young adults. We have a big problem in my constituency with county lines, and particularly at the YMCA, with vulnerable young adults being targeted by these evil gangs to try to sell drug, et cetera.



You touched on how that decreased during the pandemic but is now increasing again, sadly. What single thing do you think could be done to tackle this evil?

Anne Longfield: It is back to normal, and the drugs market is as buoyant as ever. The big answer is that you reduce the vulnerability of those kids, because they only pick on kids as commodities when they are vulnerable. How you do that is you keep a protective factor around them. You keep them in schools. You identify who those kids are in advance and you help families to be able to support and protect those children if they are in danger. Without that protection, my fear is that there is a group of vulnerable teenagers who are easy targets and, sadly, are seen as quite disposable commodities by ruthless gangs.

Q252 **Jonathan Gullis:** Commissioner, could you confirm for the Committee the number of times you have used your power to enter premises over the last year and what the impact of those visits has been?

Anne Longfield: I generally go probably about once a fortnight, and also my team. I cannot give you the exact number. I am sure someone has given me that in a briefing note, so they will be sighing at the moment. It is in the order of a visit probably two or three times a month.

The impact of those visits is really important. I have visited children who are in secure mental-health accommodation and who I have become aware of in terms of their concern about the treatment they are getting. When you read on a piece of paper the conditions they are in, it is described as a suite of rooms, it is described as a dining area and the like. Going along and finding that that is actually the equivalent of a small cell with a toilet in a bedroom brings home the reality, and I can push for that individual child, and of course other kids in that situation.

Also it has been important to go to secure children's homes, especially those that are out of the area of their hometown. This was behind a lot of the information around our report on out-of-area pass-the-parcel at Christmas time. It is only through visiting and meeting those kids and talking to them about their experience and their expectations that you can really get to the point of understanding quite how isolated they often feel, some would say abandoned. If they are in the secure youth estate, you see the reality of conditions that children are expected to live in.

Q253 **Tom Hunt:** On the independence of the Office of the Children's Commissioner, frankly you have demonstrated over the last few months that that is absolutely the case. With regards to Ofsted and Ofqual, to what extent do you think they are independent and are able, and feel able, to speak out and highlight if they believe, at a particular moment in time, that government policy is not where it needs to be?

Anne Longfield: They do not have my level of independence, that is for sure. I am pleased you said that about demonstrating independence over the last year, because I think that certainly is the case. They do not have that level of independence. I devise my business plan and I talk to



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others, but the Secretary of State does not see that until just before I publish. If I am publishing a report, of course, I will let someone know when it goes to publication, but it will not be seen for checking beforehand. That level of collaboration is in place for the other agencies. Those organisations work within a much tighter framework.

For me, independence is a strength of the Office. I could not represent children, which at the end of the day is what I am here for, unless I had that independence. However, other organisations are much more closely aligned with the Department as part of the DfE family of public bodies.

Chair: I also think you offer a leadership role, whatever the regulations say, and that has been noted.

Anne Longfield: That is exactly what I think I am for.

Chair: Yes, absolutely.

Q254 **David Johnston:** When you look back over your tenure, how do you assess the state of childhood today compared to what it was like five years ago?

Anne Longfield: I am getting towards the end of the six years, which have gone incredibly fast, and I have been incredibly privileged to do this and have enjoyed it completely. Of course, there has been lots of change, but in many ways nothing has changed. The digital world has exploded and now is seen as being just part of life. Six years ago there was a sense that you lived your life in the physical world and then you went digital. That is not the case now. Most kids are online for vast amounts of their lives, which brings huge amounts of challenges in terms of what they see, what they do and how they perceive the world.

I would like to think there are issues that I have moved forward, such as children's mental health. I was horrified early in the post when children came to see me and talked about knowing there was no mental health support there, knowing that they would have to try to take their own life before they got any help. I think we have moved that on. There are now mental health teams in some schools. I would like to see them in all schools.

I also think there is a greater understanding of what vulnerability means for kids. One of the things I was really committed to early on was to identify what vulnerability means, the nature and scale of vulnerability in this country, which is what we set out to do with the vulnerability framework, which has increasingly recognised what vulnerability means, and the pandemic has allowed people to understand and have reference points to what vulnerability means and how it holds kids back during that period of time.

Families are still busy. Poverty has risen during that time and looks set to do so over the coming years. We have not yet tackled those real issues around disadvantage that I have been identifying in vulnerability. Some



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of those have been warned about for many years by me and others. They have become worse during this period. I would say we are at a crossroads now; kids are back at school but we need to look at a recovery package that puts kids ahead.

Chair: Try to be more concise, if you can; there is lots to say.

Q255 **David Johnston:** That is a very good answer. In a sentence, what is the biggest thing you think has got worse in your period as Children's Commissioner?

Anne Longfield: I would say the disadvantage gap. That might be slightly marred by the fact we have had Covid for the last six months, but I certainly think that is the case.

Q256 **Chair:** When you say disadvantage gap, do you mean in terms of educational attainment or food poverty, or a mixture of everything?

Anne Longfield: I mean a mixture of everything, but it is clearly seen within education and poverty.

Q257 **Chair:** You and charities have identified what have been termed new frontiers of vulnerable children during the lockdown. Do the Government need to reclassify what is seen as a vulnerable child?

Anne Longfield: Yes, I think they do. Government need to classify what they do see as a vulnerable child in the first instance. One of the positive developments over the pandemic was that the Cabinet Office inter-ministerial group looked at vulnerable children over that period and really put a focus on it. That is something that needs to continue. Every Department will define vulnerable children differently. I want them all to recognise the vulnerability framework that I have put in place, because I think that only by having a common understanding of vulnerability—and that needs to be broad—can Government as a whole work together to reduce those risks.

Q258 **Chair:** Could you send the Committee an updated classification of vulnerable children that every Department should use? That would be helpful.

Anne Longfield: Yes, of course.

Chair: We will publish that guidance.

Q259 **David Johnston:** If the disadvantage gap is the thing that has become worse, is there a policy or policies that you think have made that the case?

Anne Longfield: The pandemic has been absolutely crucial to driving that disadvantage and increasing vulnerability. The starting point, though, for many children has been that vulnerable children have not been at the forefront of decisions when decisions are being made. That is what needs to change, whichever Department that is. There are some policies that are absolutely crucial. Early years in itself would be an



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absolute starting point in terms of building back better for disadvantaged kids.

Q260 Fleur Anderson: I have a couple of follow-on questions and a more general question about achievements over the last five years. The first question is looking more into the policies that should be changed. A lot of child-poverty campaigns and focus have come together and highlighted the benefit cap and the two-child limit as being one of the key policies that they would like to see changed, which has also been highlighted by my own local foodbank and baby bank, Little Village. Would you agree that that is a key policy? Would a change in that make a big difference in the increasing disadvantage that you are seeing?

Anne Longfield: Yes, I would agree with that. Yes, a lot of policy and charity organisations have given evidence that that is the case. The foodbanks will also tell you that there is a rise in demand when Universal Credit meets its next level. I think the welfare system is one that, again, needs to be reset around families with children. I asked during the pandemic that there should be an increase, not only in Universal Credit but also in child allowance. That would be a really valuable and effective way to get that support to those families and those children.

But this is for the long haul. It has to be an obsession. It can be done. We can do things around reducing poverty. We have seen it happen with pensioner poverty, but it now needs to happen with children because children are the poorest category in this country, 26% of children, whereas 13% of pensioners. That level of determination and that change of policies need to be what we see put in place.

Q261 Fleur Anderson: I welcome your focus on the early years and your report especially, but you have not said much about youth services and youth services cuts. The YMCA said it has been cut by 70% in real terms in the last decade. In London, 101 youth centres have closed and lots of youth-worker jobs have now gone. What do you think is the impact of those cuts on youth services and your role, in particular, in being able to join up the changes of youth services? You were talking about girls, gangs and county lines as well, and they are not being picked up by youth services in a way they might have done before. Is this having an impact, and is it important?

Anne Longfield: It is, and we highlighted the reduction in support for youth services and funding for youth services in our finance report with IFS last year. There is, on average, a 60% to 70% reduction in financial support for youth services. Also I have been arguing the case for youth workers to be involved during the pandemic to reach out to those vulnerable teenagers, those who may think that school is not for them, those who may think that they will not return to school or are being targeted by gangs and groomed.

I do think that youth workers are part of the support mechanisms and protective factors that we need to see in place. I have long wanted youth



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workers to work in and around schools. I know that is not popular with everyone, but that is where young people are. There would be such added value to having a youth team working in and around schools. That is one area that I will continue to push for.

Q262 Fleur Anderson: Your five-year plan set out a number of ambitious commitments, and in your first accountability session with the Committee you expressed hope that you would see a positive improvement. You have been very positive today, although there are some very grim figures here. In what ways have those ambitions translated into positive change for children at a local level?

Anne Longfield: The world goes on around me, and I obviously cannot make the world respond in every way I would wish, but I think there has been a change in each of those areas I set out. One of the first things was an understanding around children's wellbeing and mental health. As children go back into school, there is more focus and understanding than ever of the importance of children's mental health. I want to see a mental health counsellor in every school—that is urgent and needs to be a priority—but there has been an improvement in counselling, and that has moved.

I would also like to see Ofsted assess schools on wellbeing as well as education. That is something that remains an ambition. Ofsted has certainly not delivered on that. As for harm, I have shone a spotlight on those children who I believe have been invisible to the state, the 1.6 million children who have a spread of challenges in their life, including very fragile home environments. That is something I think there is an understanding of now.

Children in care. I have continued to press for their real concerns, one being about the stability of their time in care. The care review is coming up. That is something that needs to be robust and systematic. Children behind closed doors, shining a very stark spotlight on their experiences. All of these are things that have moved forward. Many of these, of course, have much more to be done.

Q263 David Simmonds: Building on that last point, you have said very strongly that you want every child in care to know that you are there as their advocate. How satisfied are you with the progress so far on that, and in particular for people contacting your advice line and making that direct connection with you that then leads to your advocating for them in the system?

Anne Longfield: We have about 1,000 children or their representatives contact us each year. I actively represent about half of those. That means that I am writing to the director of children's services or the head of the hospital, explaining my concerns and asking them to take action. Those are real representations that usually result in a very positive resolution. Over the last year, year and a half, I have invested more investigative



capacity around the Help at Hand service to be able to reach out to those children who are in secure accommodation or behind closed doors.

This links to a former question. We have been able to visit many more, we have been able to pick up on some of those issues and been able to present ourselves to them in a much more direct way. That is very important. It also relies on a robust advocacy service in place locally for children in care, which is variable around the country. It relies on local authorities having the capacity to be able to deliver the level of care that they know is needed. Also I would say it depends on there being enough resources in the system to be able to prevent those children falling into crisis in the first place. I think the Help at Hand service is an absolutely integral part.

Q264 Ian Mearns: Anne, you call for a £1 billion catch-up fund to be targeted solely to support disadvantaged and vulnerable children. Is £1 billion enough? What measures do you think might be necessary to ensure all this funding gets through to the children who need it the most?

Anne Longfield: £1 billion has always been a starting point for me. That is with it being targeted at the most disadvantaged children. No, it is not enough and, no, one year is not enough. This needs to be for the long term. We put out a report last week, "Childhood in the time of Coronavirus". What we are advocating within that is that there is a comprehensive recovery package for all children, but for disadvantaged children in particular, which tackles head on the underlying causes of vulnerability and seeks to provide the infrastructure in place that will help children not only catch up but get ahead. That is around school support, bringing in the Troubled Families funds, starting early and also having the holiday, breakfast and after-school support that can help children thrive over their time in school.

Q265 Ian Mearns: You have called for recovery packages for areas such as children's social care, early years and children who are experiencing homelessness. When will you set out the details of what you would like to see in these recovery packages?

Anne Longfield: One of the things that we have been doing, which is slightly more behind the scenes—most of the work is behind the scenes—is putting forward proposals around the spending review. That is a big point in the Government deciding what they spend their money on. We produced a challenge document for the spending review that highlights the kinds of interventions we need and makes the case for support for vulnerable children. At the moment it is being circulated to Government Ministers and officials, and we have had conversations on that basis. Later this month we will be publishing the document for wider dissemination.

Q266 Ian Mearns: Sadly your last year, or the bulk of the last year, has been spent on Covid issues. With the four or five months remaining in your tenure, what else would you like to leave us with, apart from the reaction



to the Covid virus? That has been vitally important, but do you feel it might have overshadowed other more important parts of your work?

Anne Longfield: It clearly had to take priority, and we made that a priority early on. It has also shone a really stark spotlight on so many of the things that we have been warning around and I have been talking about over the five and a half years. The reality check this has created, knowing that, I do not think there is a way that we can go back to leaving these children in invisibility in the future. A recovery package would be a long-term recovery package for children, which speaks to building back better, that tackles the things around levelling up. We have not yet had the Nightingale moment for kids in a way that we know, as a country, we can so creatively do, but this, in my view, could be it.

This would encompass cross-Government support. I think there needs to be a Cabinet Minister for children. It needs to be at the heart. We have seen what happens when it is not. It needs to tackle everything from early years to the care review to mental health and, indeed, those kids behind closed doors.

Q267 **Chair:** Would you split up education and have a Cabinet Minister for education and skills—post-16, skills and universities—and then a Children’s Minister? Is that how you would do it?

Anne Longfield: I know in theory there is already representation for children at the Cabinet table, but I think there needs to be that relentless focus from someone who can do the representation that I am talking about, always looking at policies in terms of children, however that is managed and split up in terms of functions.

For me the important thing that I leave behind, the really important thing, is the index of child vulnerability. It is there. It is now operating and gives data on every single local-authority area. We are shortly, as you know, going to be making it available for constituency areas: 120 different indicators of vulnerability, live data. That is the kind of information that means people are not only going to be able to make better decisions going forward, but with that level of information there is no reason not to do it. That makes the case in itself and is something that clearly I would like to see continued.

Q268 **Tom Hunt:** A quick question. I know you were very supportive of the concept of family hubs. In Suffolk we have moved away from children’s centres to family hubs, which have a slightly different age range and are more driven by a desire to reach out to those families that really need help—a whole family approach. I know you supported family hubs, but I want a bit more detail about how significant you think that shift will be and whether you think it will make a difference to vulnerable children and families.

Anne Longfield: I think family hubs are a core part of the infrastructure of support that is needed for vulnerable children. I was always a fan of children’s centres, and I see family hubs as an extension of children’s



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centres. The joy of them is that they are local, they are owned by the community and they are full of people who can be there to respond to people. I visited one in Doncaster on Friday.

The developments so far have been quite slow. I think they need a rocket booster under them. Government should be bold. They should look at incentivising the development of children's centres and adaption into a wider age-range of family hubs. They should incorporate it into their early intervention support, and they should look at how they can intervene with their Troubled Families teams, possibly collocating them within family hubs. Government have an important commitment there, but they are being a bit coy about them at the moment. They should step out and see that around the country there are potentially 2,500 different sites where family hubs could be operating in a reasonably short period of time. That would be so important for families.

Q269 Fleur Anderson: Highlighting your endorsement of children's centres and Sure Start, I could not agree more. That transformed my family's life and our community when they were around. We need to have them locally as well. That is something you are saying, local centres.

Your report asks the Government to focus on reducing educational inequalities as central to the levelling-up agenda. What specific actions do you want to see that will achieve a reduction in educational inequality? You have touched on some areas, and this is an opportunity to say some more about which areas. What level of resource do you think is needed?

Anne Longfield: I want this to be a driving mission. I would like there to be a five-year plan in the first instance about driving down inequalities and reducing the disadvantage gap. I would like that to be a test of success that everyone would recognise. The early years are absolutely vital as far as I am concerned, putting in place the checks for two and a half year-olds—they are there, but use them properly—to identify what is needed. A child who starts behind when they start school continues behind and is much more likely to be excluded.

I would like to see a much more inclusive approach to schools. I have raised concerns around when children drop out of schools. The majority of schools do not exclude children. Nine out of 10 do not to the extent that the others do, but none the less this is something that remains a concern. I would like to see a package around schools that bridges that gap between what happens within the classroom and what happens at home, and in a much more direct way—again, the breakfast clubs, the after-school clubs, the holiday clubs, the kinds of things that fill the gap, the glue between school and home, and tackle that disadvantage. Of course, within there is reducing poverty for families, which we know is going to be an immense challenge over coming months and years.

This is something that will require funds. The savings it would make in terms of reduced pulls on the public purse in the future would be immense, in my view, but it needs to have that business case, it needs to



have that leadership from the top, which we know is how things get done. In my view, this would be one of the shining legacies of a Government, levelling up and starting with children.

Q270 Fleur Anderson: On the two-and-a-half-year checks, the ones done by the health workers at the moment, that would be a join up between health services and this whole agenda?

Anne Longfield: Yes, indeed. What we are talking about here is an outcome framework for children that can measure progress and do it in a coherent way. The two-and-a-half-year-old checks were an important intervention, but we know they are not all done consistently, they do not target disadvantage and only half of local authorities, when we asked them recently, could tell us whether the needs that had been identified had been followed up. They need to be much more robust and used much better. In so many of these ways, the tools are there but they are not being used in any coherent way, and the kids who are the most disadvantaged are, of course, the ones who fall through the gaps.

Q271 Chair: I absolutely agree with you that there needs to be a long-term plan. Can I go back to the food-hunger issue? You said there were a lot of disparate policies. Would you characterise the Government dealing with the child food-hunger policy by Band-Aid, Elastoplast, rather than dealing with the serious wound properly?

Anne Longfield: Yes. What we have seen is reactive, reacting to either immediate pressure or public pressure. I am grateful the Chancellor has invested money here. That is important, but it is not enough to give children the kind of security they need, or families the kind of permanence they need to be able to plan for the future and thrive. We need to have a plan around food security. It needs to be very closely linked with poverty reduction for children, but it needs to be one that is part of a recovery package and leadership from the top.

Q272 Chair: Have you done any analysis so that the worries of the bean counters at the Treasury can be alleviated? Have you done any analysis of the benefits in that if we solve the problem of child food hunger, the benefits to the taxpayer of children's attainment will be significant in the long term? Have you done any analysis of that?

Anne Longfield: We certainly did. The Education Endowment Foundation and the IFS have done analysis on that. They are very clear that breakfast clubs alone improve children's ability to concentrate and, in turn, their progress in reading and writing. Going back to the early years part of that, it can be systematically proven that, throughout a child's education, starting well helps you progress well. The IFS and the Education Endowment Foundation are very clear on the progress, but any contact with either children or parents to tell you what happens if that is not in place will also spotlight what needs to change.

Chair: Jonathan Gullis, can you put your camera back on, please?



Q273 **Jonathan Gullis:** Sorry, I have the baby, who you might hear in the background, here in the office.

Commissioner, with regards to the holiday hunger stuff that was mentioned, my predecessor was a big community champion on this particular issue and we are very grateful to have had the Hubb Foundation deliver 150,000 meals across the city during Covid. My angle on this is the cost of childcare, during the summer holidays in particular, with it being six weeks. Do you think there is a case, like I do, that there should be a four-week summer holiday, with those two additional weeks instead being distributed in the October and May half term to bring down the cost of childcare? That would mean holiday hunger is not necessarily as big a financial burden on parents as it is at present?

Chair: Can I add serious summer activity programmes, holiday camps, and so on, in schools up and down the country?

Jonathan Gullis: Yes, absolutely. I agree that we need to invest much more in the holiday clubs sector.

Anne Longfield: I am always a bit split on four weeks rather than six weeks. I know a lot of the evidence points you in that direction, but I am talking personally. I recognise that that would be a step forward. I do not think that gets you away from the cost of childcare and the needs of children when they are not in school. What we need to see is a year-round package for families that provides support to enable children to have safe places to go, that local authorities are involved, that they are working with schools and that those holiday packages, which would be childcare plus decent, nourishing food during that period, become part of life.

Chair: Thank you again, Anne, for everything you have done, and thank you for this last appearance before our Committee as Children's Commissioner. I probably speak for all members of the Committee that we hope you have a very strong role in public life after your role finishes as Children's Commissioner, whether it is in the public sphere or with a charity or whatever it may be. Children in this country and their families need your wisdom and campaigning. Thank you again for all that you have done, and we wish you very well for the future.

Anne Longfield: That is very kind of you, thank you. Onwards.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Michelle Donelan.

Q274 **Chair:** Good morning to the Minister for Universities. It is very good to have you here today, especially so soon after your recent appearance before the Committee a few weeks ago. For the benefit of the tape and those watching on the internet, could you introduce yourself and your title, please?



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Michelle Donelan: Yes. Thank you very much, Chair. Michelle Donelan, Minister for Universities.

Q275 **Chair:** Thank you. I will start by asking you how many students across the country are in lockdown at the moment.

Michelle Donelan: Unfortunately, I cannot give you the accurate figure, because Public Health England collates that figure and we have been verifying those that are deemed outbreaks. Most of those students who are in social isolation at the moment will have been identified by the track and trace system, as opposed to those who have Covid. The numbers who have Covid and are also self-isolating are still very low proportions in every university. Most of these universities have 20,000 to 40,000 students, so they are large in number. It is important to stress that I do understand how difficult it must be for each and every one of those students who are isolating.

Q276 **Chair:** Just a few weeks ago, in fact it was possibly one week ago, there were reports of over 3,000 students in lockdown in their halls of residence from Dundee to Exeter. You must have some estimate as to whether that figure is roughly the same or doubled. What is it?

Michelle Donelan: It is changing. It will be changing as I speak. That figure was representative of the whole of the UK, and as you will have seen on the news, there have been a number of outbreaks in Scotland, some in Wales and one in Northern Ireland. That figure is constantly changing. However, as I said, it is a really small proportion of students per university, and that is how we want to keep it, and continue to drive down that figure. But it is done to make sure that students are kept safe.

Q277 **Chair:** If you could possibly let the Committee know today, or in the next couple of days, what the updated figure is, as much as you can possibly get those figures, that would be extremely helpful. Would you be able to do that?

Michelle Donelan: Yes. As I say, it is changing all the time, and it is Public Health England that controls that data, not the Department for Education.

Q278 **Chair:** Sure, but they must be able to give you the information.

Michelle Donelan: Can you clarify if you want the number of students self-isolating or the number of students with coronavirus?

Q279 **Chair:** I think both would be quite useful, but particularly those in lockdown in halls of residence at the moment.

Michelle Donelan: Yes, we can continue to keep you updated with the figures to the extent that we have them.

Q280 **Chair:** The reason I ask—at the moment, you are right, it is relatively low compared to the 2.8 million students and academics who are at university—is if the number of students in lockdown grows significantly at



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even more universities, so instead of it being, let us say, 3,000 or 4,000 a week or so ago, it went up to 30,000 or 40,000, what would then be the plan of the Government, Public Health England and the relevant bodies to deal with that?

Michelle Donelan: I want to stress that all of our policies across Government, not just in the Department for Education, are kept under constant review, in line with the guidance from SAGE and our Chief Medical Officer. We work very closely with the Department of Health and Social Care. We are certainly not fixed to any one policy indefinitely. We are in the midst of a live pandemic. What our guidance did was allow us a lot of flexibility in that sense anyway, because it set up a tier system. The tier system works on the basis of the situation on the ground. A university could go all the way up to the fourth tier, which is basically all online. That way the reaction is relative to what is happening in that area; you are not almost closing universities where there is hardly any Covid at all in that area. It is a much more responsive and reactive system that works on exactly what is happening locally to try to safeguard the face-to-face education of students for as long as possible.

Q281 **Chair:** What you have said is very important, but what if it goes up significantly? God forbid, let us say it went up to 50,000 or even more, what then happens? The Department must have a slightly different plan ready to deal with such a situation.

Michelle Donelan: Yes. We are monitoring it daily. I do not think it would ever go from where it is now to a higher number without us looking at it and potentially re-evaluating our policies. That would not be taken solely on my advice, or the advice of the Department for Education. It is really important that we stick to how we have operated throughout this pandemic, which is working off the guidance of the scientists and the Chief Medical Officer, and looking at the context of those situations.

How it is working at the moment is that each university is working very closely with their local Public Health England team. They are working in conjunction to formulate the best plans for what is happening on the ground. It is very much led from a health perspective, and that is how we will continue to do it. I cannot make policy off the cuff for a hypothetical scenario, but what I can do is assure you that my priority throughout this pandemic is, and will continue to be, the safety, wellbeing and health of students, staff and universities. If that means we need to change course at any particular moment, we will do that.

Q282 **Chair:** Students who have gone to universities far away from where they live and who are now in lockdown will inevitably have anxious families at home. What is the rule about students going back home safely to their families, if that is what they want to do and that is what their families want?

Michelle Donelan: I can only begin to imagine how upsetting, worrying and concerning this must be for the family and friends of students who



are at university, some for the very first time in their lives, who may ended up in social isolation in week two. These are very difficult times. The implications of Covid are enormous. Yes, there are no restrictions on them going to visit people from other areas, however, there potentially will be restrictions on them staying overnight in certain areas, because some areas have a policy of not mixing households, so they would not be able to host students from those areas. That is awful; nobody is denying that fact. If students are homesick and they want to go home for the weekend, potentially they are not able to stay over. That is really tough, and that is one of the reasons why we wanted to give that clarity around Christmas, to ensure there was at least a ray of hope at the end that students could get home for Christmas and spend that with their loved ones, their carers or their families. It is a very difficult time for everybody; I fully admit that.

Q283 Chair: The good news is you are not going to be the Grinch who steals Christmas from students and their families but, just to be clear, what happens if a student wants to go home to their family? They may feel safer with their family. What is the rule on that? Even if they were told they could not go home, how would they be stopped from travelling?

Michelle Donelan: A range of different scenarios could happen here. A student could decide that they want to move all of their studies online, or that they potentially want to leave university, et cetera. They should have that discussion with their university, and we have urged universities to be as flexible and as accommodating as possible for students, and understand individual circumstances. It may be that that individual student is vulnerable, or their family is vulnerable, so they do not want to keep yo-yoing from university to home to visit, and potentially putting them at risk. That would be the first scenario.

The second scenario may be that they want to go home for the weekend. They would need to check the restrictions in place on the area where their parents or their carers reside. If their parents or carers resided in one of these areas that had tighter restrictions about household mixing and they are not allowed to host people overnight, they would not be able to do that. They could only meet up for a day, and potentially outside. If we are talking about the end of term and going home for Christmas, we are producing additional guidance and a really in-depth Q&A on this to iron out a lot of the questions that you have asked. We have made a solid commitment that students will be able to go home for Christmas. We are working with the universities to bring forward some of those term times.

Q284 Chair: Do you think that students and their families would welcome an updated public letter from the Chief Medical Officer setting out the situation? What are you doing, working with the Office for Students, to ensure there is some kind of high-standard online and blended learning across the board so it is not a postcode lottery of university provision?



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Michelle Donelan: I can certainly take away that idea and suggestion about a letter from the Chief Medical Officer. That is a good idea. I try my best to keep students as updated as possible with open letters, working on things like The Student Room, and doing Q&As on that, and with UCAS and different media, et cetera. Anything we can do to communicate with students and parents is vital at this time of uncertainty, so I will take your suggestion away. Sorry, what was your second point?

Chair: Are you working with the Office for Students on a uniform standard of blended and online learning?

Michelle Donelan: Yes. I have been very clear, as have the Government, that we expect the quality to be there despite it being potentially online, or a blended offer. The Office for Students has also been very clear on this. Let us not forget it is a registration condition that universities have to meet, and they have been very clear throughout this process that they expect the quality to be there. They will be monitoring that. They get complaints, just like the OIA do, and they have produced more details throughout, really hitting home to universities. Universities have also had a lot longer. In the last term, provision had to be transitioned to online almost overnight. Now they have spent the last few months making sure it is innovative, interactive and dynamic.

Q285 **Chair:** Finally, before I pass on to Fleur, what are you doing in terms of ensuring that students get discounts of some kind, whether it is towards the cost of their tuition next year or a refund, if they are not getting the full learning that they would expect? Surely it is wrong to pay the full £9,000-plus and not get the full package, whatever the reason. If they are not getting the full package, surely they should get some kind of discount.

Michelle Donelan: First of all, we all appreciate how difficult this is for students, and how different the offer is this year for university. But to be absolutely clear, I have been very clear with universities that I expect the quality and the standards to be there. It is important to note that often online learning is more expensive than traditional learning, if done correctly and innovatively, et cetera. University students are consumers. They have consumer rights, and the CMA has published that. If they feel their quality of education is not there, that the quantity is not there, they can go through the process of, first, complaining to their university and, if that is not successful, they can then go to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

Q286 **Chair:** In reality that will not be easy, and the bureaucracy of that will be very hard. Should we not just give students an automatic discount where they are not getting a significant amount of face-to-face learning with lecturers or tutors, or whatever it may be? If you and the OFS said that, I think it would help students quite a bit under the current circumstances.

Michelle Donelan: There are two points in response to this. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator is the process available. It is a proper



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complaints process that is set up to look at those individual circumstances. I do not accept that, across the board, the situation is that students are getting poor-quality learning. In fact, we are seeing innovative and amazing examples. I have seen them at first hand in these universities. I do not accept that. The second point is that the Government only set maximum fees; they do not set a minimum. It is up to universities. If they want, and if they believe they are not providing adequate learning that is up to that value, they could themselves issue a discount. The Government do not have the final say on that.

Q287 Fleur Anderson: Just to declare an interest, I have two children at university—one in second year and one in first year—who within nine days got Covid at Leeds. I have experienced exactly this at first hand, and we are going to come on to talk about testing in a minute. Also, I am a university MP. I have a university in my patch, Roehampton. I know and acknowledge, as you do, that university staff have put a lot of effort into moving online, and have put a lot into how these courses will be delivered, but in many ways there will be inconsistencies, as has just been talked about. With £9,000 fees, if students do not feel they have value for money, if they do not feel their course has delivered through the year, is there any way you could make it easier to apply for discounts, rather than going to the OIA, if it is clear that a whole course is not up to scratch?

Michelle Donelan: I do hope your child is fine, first of all.

Fleur Anderson: Yes, he is.

Michelle Donelan: Fantastic news. The first process would be that they go to the university and make the complaint, and the hope is that the university would sort that out and resolve their issues. It is then a matter of escalation to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. They look at clusters. Say there were a few within a certain university or within a certain course, they could potentially look at remedies to resolve the situation, or look at solutions for that entire cohort. That might mean discounts, et cetera, and they might identify a problem. Also, the Office for Students receives complaints and can drill down and look at whether there is a quality concern within a certain course or a certain university. As I said before, it is a registration condition that universities have to meet. So far during Covid, complaints have been going in to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. That process is working. They were represented on the taskforce that I had last week, and they certainly did not share any concerns that they felt the process was too difficult for students.

Q288 Fleur Anderson: Any advice that could be given centrally, especially for new students, about what should be expected and, therefore, what would meet the grounds for a complaint would be excellent. Also, in terms of university funding, in Scotland I understand that universities have received funding to meet the shortfall they have had. My local university, Roehampton, has had a huge shortfall in accommodation costs, not being



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able to hire out accommodation for conferences over the summer. There seems to be some inconsistency in funding between Scotland and England, and I am not sure about Wales. Could you say something about funding and the difference it would make for some universities that do not have huge amounts of capital funds or reserves, to be able to survive in the same way that other universities that have fallback can do? What funding and support could they expect through the year so that we maintain our excellent university sector?

Michelle Donelan: I constantly monitor the health of universities, working with the Office for Students. Back in May we announced a stabilisation package, which included things like bringing forward tuition fee funding, reprofiling and QR research funding, all to help stabilise university finances. We have also announced a restructuring regime that universities can apply into, should they have financial concerns. Nobody as yet has self-referred, but that is a safety net, if you like, that is there and available.

Let us not forget that universities also benefited from the Job Retention Scheme, and they were also eligible for a number of the loans that were available, so there have been lots of different packages for universities. On top of that, BEIS announced nearly £280 million to support the research base in any potential loss of international students, although I must say, so far, fingers crossed, the signs show that international students have arrived here. There is still some time to go until we know exactly the final figures, but it is looking very positive indeed. We have not seen it falling off a cliff, as had been projected by some of the media much earlier in the year.

Q289 **Fleur Anderson:** The stabilisation package is bringing forward fees, and has an ability to apply for loans, but it is not actual grant funding to make up for the income shortfall. Is that something you would consider in the future?

Michelle Donelan: BEIS did that with some of their additional new money and, as I say, there is the restructuring regime, which is the safety net to catch universities if needed. What we were trying to do was stabilise university finances and have the liquidity there that they needed during those tough times. We keep them under constant review, and I am monitoring our watchlist weekly to make sure that we are protecting some of the world-class universities that we are fortunate enough to have here in England.

Chair: Thank you. Jonathan Gullis, I wonder if you could come in on your specific question, but also ask David Simmonds's questions. He had a couple, but he has had to leave for another reason.

Q290 **Jonathan Gullis:** Happy to, Chair. Minister, you were just talking about stabilising university finance. The latest estimates believe universities have about £45 billion in reserves, if my research is correct. Do you not think it appropriate that universities start dipping into their own pockets



and covering the costs themselves, rather than taxpayers constantly having to bail out?

Michelle Donelan: Each university will have a different financial situation. I cannot speak to the accuracy of the figure that you have quoted, but I am sure it is if it is from a reliable source. That will be the overall picture, so it will depend on the individual university's circumstances. I have been clear throughout, as has our Department, that of course we expect universities to be using some of their reserves where appropriate, and looking internally to deal with some of these problems. At the same time, we also want to safeguard and protect our world-class, leading universities. Government are working in partnership. Government do not have the answer to everything. Some answers have to come from the sector, which is why we set up the Higher Education Taskforce, which was originally meeting daily and now meets weekly, to discuss a range of options, specifically around those that have been created and born out of Covid.

Q291 **Jonathan Gullis:** On 3 September, a paper went to SAGE advising that a national strategy defining key principles for additional testing in higher education that can be adapted and implemented locally should be developed. Has that strategy been developed and implemented, and if not, why did students return to higher-education campuses and accommodation without such a national strategy in place?

Michelle Donelan: You are quite right that SAGE emphasised the importance of testing as part of the measures available to protect students, staff and the wider community. We have worked with the Department of Health to ensure that 98% of all universities have a testing facility within 3 miles, and we are now getting that figure right down to 1.5 miles, which is the case in many universities already. We have also ensured that every university has an outbreak plan, which has been shared with their local Public Health England team. That is really the important thing, the local relationships on the ground and how effectively they are working together, so that if there is an outbreak they can deal with it swiftly, effectively and efficiently. One of the key elements of testing, as we all know, is the trace element, which is why we are now seeing a number of students self-isolating to protect others and to minimise the spread of the virus.

Q292 **Jonathan Gullis:** Obviously the same paper to SAGE noted that infections would probably peak towards the end of term. The Christmas and New Year period, therefore, poses a significant risk to both extended families and local communities. What action was taken when the risk of peak infections coinciding with Christmas and New Year was raised, and can you guarantee that students at university will be able to go home for Christmas?

Chair: Could I just come in on that? Sorry to interrupt, Michelle, but you said earlier that it could be that students could not go home if there were household restrictions in place, or local lockdowns, or whatever it may



be. What happens if that is in place at Christmastime? Surely then the students will not be able to get home at Christmas.

Michelle Donelan: We have made a guarantee that it will be possible for students to go home at Christmas. We will make sure that we facilitate that. One of the problems that SAGE identified as to why Christmas was a potential issue was because of the mass movement of students at what could be a peak time in terms of the virus and the transmission. We are looking at options, which will be detailed in our Q&A. I cannot really pre-empt that, but some of the measures on the table are things like quarantining beforehand, or utilising testing, and other things like that, so we can ensure that students who do go home for Christmas, who want to go home, go home knowing that they are not going to potentially infect their loved ones. That is a key priority for us, and we know it is a key priority for them. Everybody wants to go home for Christmas.

Q293 **Chair:** Is that because there will be mass testing available by then for students?

Michelle Donelan: No. We are looking at a range of options that the Secretary of State mentioned in his statement, including things like potential quarantining before people go home. It will also depend on what areas they are going from and to. That is why we are producing a robust Q&A on this, because this opens a number of follow-on questions that we are very aware of. We have set up a sub-working group of the Higher Education Taskforce, working with the university sector, to make sure we can anticipate all these questions in advance and provide robust answers. Of course, it is all going to be caveated, because things may change, the pandemic may change, but what will not change is the fact that students can go home for Christmas. Whatever happens, we will make sure that that is a possibility.

That is one of the reasons why we are going to ensure that we move the end of term forward, when necessary, so the last two weeks will potentially be online in some cases. If a student did, for instance, catch Covid towards the end of term, or was in self-isolation, they would finish that self-isolation in time to get home for Christmas. We are making sure we have thought of everything.

Q294 **Fleur Anderson:** Good luck with making students all self-quarantine for the last two weeks of the Christmas term. Yes, there are lots of questions about that, clearly. My question is about how much information you have about the actual situation in universities. My example comes from Roehampton in my patch in south-west London, where currently they have an outbreak plan in place. When they heard about a positive test—a student with symptoms on campus—they were referred to Hounslow in west London for their test site. There is no site within 1.5 miles. There is no testing site in Wandsworth at all. They have asked for postal testing kits so they could quickly test, and they have not been able to get any. They have a GP on campus, but they do not have any testing kits to make up for the shortfall.



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When they wanted to report their test results to the London coronavirus cell, which is what they are told to do within the plan, they have had staff holding on a phone line for over three hours, waiting to be able to tell them about the test-and-trace results, but not even able to log that information with the London cell as they have been told to do. There are significant issues with the situation in Roehampton, which are causing a lot of concern. My question is whether you know about those local situations, whether you feel you have a good picture nationally about what universities are facing and whether you are able to put these right where they are turning up.

Michelle Donelan: I hold the weekly taskforce, and I urge the representatives of every sector body there to come to me with any problems that they have. I have regularly communicated with all universities. My door is also always open to all MPs, and I hold a weekly surgery for that as well. I will be honest with you that I have not had that specific case referred to me, either by yourself or anybody else. I will take that up urgently today to look into the complexities around it and find out exactly what has happened. As soon as I get referred to a potential issue with any university, despite them being autonomous organisations and institutions, I think it is my duty to make sure that I pick it up within 24 hours, not just on testing but on potential support that is being given to students, or any other issue. I will take that away and try to get you some answers before the end of the day.

I can announce to the Committee today that this week we will be launching a new Public Health England line dedicated specifically to universities, akin to what we have done with schools. That should help on one of the issues that you have mentioned. I am not for one minute suggesting that there are not potentially some delays in certain areas, or some problems, because we are in the midst of a pandemic. I am more than happy to pick up anything that comes about.

I want to clarify something you said before about all students having to self-isolate.

Chair: In a nutshell, Michelle. We have to get on, so as concise as possible, please.

Michelle Donelan: Okay. I wanted to clarify that I did not say all students would have to self-isolate. I said that is one of the tools we are looking at.

Q295 **Chair:** Thank you. Is the helpline a DfE helpline like the schools one, or a PHE helpline?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, it is a DfE one, in conjunction with PHE.

Q296 **Chair:** It is not a press-1, press-2 helpline? You get through to a human straightaway, do you?



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Michelle Donelan: That is the hope, definitely. I cannot guarantee wait times.

Q297 **Chair:** That is very good news about the helpline. I think that will be welcome. Can students ring it as well, or is it just for universities?

Michelle Donelan: I think students could ring it if they had concerns, if they were thinking things were not working in the way they should locally.

Chair: Ian, can you do a quick one before Apsana, because she has not spoken yet, thanks.

Q298 **Ian Mearns:** It is a very quick one, Chair. I am led to believe that the University of St Andrews have told their first-year students that if they withdraw from the year before 1 December they would get all their money back. What does that mean for the sector, if a university decides it possibly cannot give students the offer they were fully expecting, and therefore they have until 1 December to make up their minds and, if they do withdraw, they will get all their money back?

Michelle Donelan: St Andrews is in Scotland, and I can certainly pick that up with Richard Lochhead, my counterpart, who I speak to every week. Universities are autonomous and, as I said before, if they feel they are not providing that quality, they can set a lower tuition fee. We only set the maximum, but we are very clear that they need to be providing quality in terms of tuition and the wider support that students deserve.

Q299 **Chair:** You can provide guidance and make it very clear what you think should happen, even if they are autonomous.

Michelle Donelan: We certainly have done that, and so has the OFS. We are monitoring the situation in terms of quality, because it would be unacceptable for a student to be paying those tuition fees and not getting the quality or support.

Q300 **Ian Mearns:** The point I am making is that this could be the finger being pulled out of the dyke, as it were, creating a demand from students all over the country if they do not feel as though their university is coming up to the mark.

Chair: I think that is a very important point, and I am sure the Minister agrees. Do you agree?

Michelle Donelan: I have said all along that if universities are not providing the quality, they cannot command that price. However, online tuition is often more expensive, and the examples I have seen are very innovative, very dynamic and interactive.

Chair: Do not forget the brilliant Open University, which I am hopefully going to ask you about at the end. It provides Rolls-Royce online learning for students.

Q301 **Apsana Begum:** Minister, thank you for your time. I want to go back a



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bit, given the fact we knew there were some failures to anticipate a spike in demand for testing when schools reopened. When did you become aware of concerns, and when did you start becoming really concerned about potential spikes in the demand for tests with universities reopening? Did the Department commission any work to model predicted outbreak rates in student halls?

Michelle Donelan: I think it is important to draw a distinction between our Department and the Department of Health. The Department of Health has been leading on the testing stuff, and it would not have been right if we had modelled health-related things. A lot of this depends on student behaviour. The vast majority of students are abiding by all the rules, and their behaviour is exemplary. That is the message that has been reiterated by vice-chancellors. However, the minority have sometimes been socialising in a way that does not fit with the guidance, and that is why we have seen some of these spikes, on the whole, arising.

Some were because some students may have arrived with Covid and not realised but, on the whole, the problem is the socialising. We can never predict human behaviour to know how it would happen. We always knew there would be cases of Covid. We are in the midst of a pandemic. If these young people had been at home versus university, they potentially could have got Covid as well, and it is important to remember that.

Our job is to minimise that risk as much as possible, which we have done, producing guidance for universities in line with SAGE, making sure that universities have spent the last few months implementing that guidance and making their campuses Covid safe and secure, and moving to blended learning. I have seen at first hand how much they have done to make their environments safer.

Q302 **Apsana Begum:** You say those plans are in place, and you mentioned outbreak plans and the guidance being given to universities, but, for example, Northumbria University having 770 students test positive is not mitigation, is it? That is a really big outbreak, and there is a real risk that there are going to be more of these outbreaks. How do you put effective guidance and plans in place to ensure there are not big outbreaks like this?

Michelle Donelan: That outbreak is challenging for those students involved. Just to be clear, that figure was misreported in the media. The figure was for those who had contracted Covid from August, not over the weekend or in the last few days, and it also included their London campus and their campus in Amsterdam as well. The real number was only just over 200, although when I say "only" that is still 200 students who are infected and I fully appreciate that fact.

We have been doing everything we can to minimise that outbreak. We continue to work with universities there, working with their local Public Health England team and providing lots of messages to students about the importance of abiding by the guidelines, the rule of six, the social



distancing and the hands, face, space, and I continue to reiterate those messages so we can get those numbers down.

Q303 Apsana Begum: Are you satisfied with the reasons that students can travel or return home from university campuses? Do you think that messaging is very clear and that students know they can go home if they need to? There is an outcry from unions and mental health charities at the moment, and I know one of my colleagues is going to ask a question about this as well. Do you think there has been sufficient messaging and support?

Michelle Donelan: One thing the OFS said last week is that they expect, as a minimum, universities to communicate daily with students, including those self-isolating. Communication is vital in periods of uncertainty. I have reiterated the message to universities, especially on the task force, of the importance of those communications. I am making sure students have the answers they need, and that is at the top of my agenda.

We have to remember why we have done what we have done, why students are now back on campus and why university campuses are open in this formation. The reason is because we have prioritised education. Our Government have made the conscious decision to prioritise education, including higher education, so students do not have their lives on hold.

Q304 Ian Mearns: On the Northumbria University outbreak, I hear what you are saying about the numbers being spread between different sites, but generally speaking we are talking about first-year students, 18-year-olds, who have been in lockdown in their own home setting for six months, or in forms of lockdown or restrictions for six months. They are away from home, many of them for the first time. We are expecting them to completely and utterly act in a completely safe way all the time. Do you think universities have done enough to make sure the supervision in halls of residence, et cetera, has been sufficient to prevent youngsters, who are understandably excited about their new surroundings, from interacting in a social way that is probably not good for their health?

Michelle Donelan: I will try and be snappy. I can see the Chair is trying to speed me up. I want to say my heart goes out to these students. I know it is not an easy task we are asking them to do, but we have done it because we wanted to prioritise their mental health and wellbeing and get them into education and not put their lives on hold. If anybody has examples of where they think universities are not doing enough, I will pick them up straightaway but the sector, I believe, has prioritised not only the education but the welfare and wellbeing of these students so they can continue their education.

Chair: Tom Hunt, you have been very patient this morning.

Q305 Tom Hunt: I want to quickly say before my main question that it is good that some of these online learning packages are advanced, and they are doing the best job they can but, for many students, real-time lectures,



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real-time tuition is always going to be superior to online. I have been slightly concerned at how easily some universities have gone into just pushing everything online when there are things they could have done to keep as much as possible in person, even despite the recent increase in cases.

My question is to do with the Office for Students, and specifically what their responsibility has been over the last three weeks, whether they have taken enough responsibility, and what your dialogue has been with the Office for Students over the last few weeks.

Michelle Donelan: I meet with the Office for Students regularly, sometimes a few times a week, if not daily if the need arises. The Office is a key member of our task force. They sent out clear messages last week to universities on the expectations around support and communications with students. Throughout this process they have been monitoring the quality. They have been very clear with universities, as we have, that we expect that quality bar to be maintained, even if tuition is moved online with the blended offer.

To be clear, I agree with you. Face-to-face learning is better, but we are in the midst of a pandemic and that is why we are doing blended learning. It is not out of choice. We want to move back to fully in person as soon as we possibly can, but in a safe way for students.

Q306 **David Johnston:** Two questions from me. First, what are you and the universities doing to make sure that disadvantaged students, in particular, do not drop out of their courses?

Michelle Donelan: This is a concern in every year, and I have spoken before about the importance of continuation and completion of a degree. It is not just about getting a disadvantaged student through the door; it is getting them that qualification and unlocking the opportunities. Getting universities open increases our chance that these students will be able to continue and complete.

For students such as I talked about before, who have been in lockdown with their parents or their carers from the beginning of the year, I think asking them to continue, never having met their lecturers, their tutors or their fellow students in person, would be a big ask, both emotionally and mentally. But I reiterated to the university sector the importance of making sure the support around students is there to give them the additional help they need to continue, and also to potentially bridge any gap due to not having been in education for a while. It is quite a big thing. The transition to university is hard enough in normal times, so this is one of the things at the top of my agenda and the university sector's.

Q307 **David Johnston:** Do you expect the dropout rate to be basically the same as it has been in previous years or are you concerned it might be a bit higher?



Michelle Donelan: I cannot predict. I would hope we can ensure it does not rise, and that needs to be a priority both for me and for the sector because we, as a Government, have prioritised education. Unless those students complete those courses, it will not unlock the opportunities we want them to have. I want to make sure we can achieve the same dropout rates, if not lower.

Q308 **David Johnston:** My second question is about mental health, about what you think needs to happen to support university students with their mental health at this time and whether you think we have made enough progress on that right now.

Michelle Donelan: The mental health of students particularly concerns me anyway. When we look at this cohort and how susceptible they are, it is much higher than some other sections of society, and when we look at some of the studies that show they have been disproportionately affected by Covid and now they are going through all they are going through, including self-isolation in strange places they have never been to, I get how difficult that is.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, I urged universities to prioritise mental health and enhance their offer rather than decrease it, move it online if they have to in certain scenarios. We have also launched Student Space in conjunction with the OFS, a £3 million additional support service on top of the £9 million the Government have done across society. One of the fundamental reasons we have kept universities open and reopened those campuses is to protect and enable students to have their mental health supported and looked after. SAGE warned of the risk of purely online learning both to the mental health and physical health of students, and that really concerned me.

Q309 **David Johnston:** Is it your sense at the moment that all universities understand this and are doing the things they ought to be doing to support students?

Michelle Donelan: If you have an example where you believe universities are not doing so, please send it my way. I am more than happy to stand up for students on any of these issues and ensure the support is there and is in place. I also understand the limitations if the university needs more support from me to be able to facilitate that. It needs to be a priority at this moment in time. I have clarified this with the task force, with all the members. With every vice-chancellor I speak to I raise the issue of mental health and mental health support.

Q310 **Tom Hunt:** You have already said that you appreciate that the transition to university is hard enough at the best of times. I remember being dumped up in Manchester by my dad and, for 10 minutes, I was locked in my room terrified that I was away from home for the first time. What made it easier was that, within 24 hours, I probably met about 200 other young people, I was going to lectures, et cetera.

There is a mental health challenge for students but particularly for first-



year students—I cannot imagine how difficult it must be at the moment, and they cannot socialise in the same way, they cannot go to lectures or meet people in a place they have never lived before. We have heard from a University and College Union spokesperson. She said that universities could be the next care homes in terms of a Covid scandal. If we are not careful, students' mental health could almost be a scandal unless there is huge attention on it.

I also think some of the rhetoric—the TV images of students being almost imprisoned in their student blocks—yes, we need to tackle this virus as a matter of priority, but it is important that we always reflect on the kind of society we want to live in. When our young first-year university students are in that position, we need to hug them and communicate to them as a society how much we are there for them. I know you touched on these things already, and I do not have a question in there, but I want to stress that point, particularly for first-year students, about the critical importance of their mental health.

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree about the vulnerabilities of first-year students. I remember my first year and being extraordinarily homesick. I completely understand and appreciate that. Universities UK, which is the largest sector body, has produced a statement today specifically about those who are self-isolating and the expectations of the university sector. That also includes a checklist, things like wellbeing checks and mental health support, and they are certainly the things that I have seen.

Every time we see an outbreak, I ring the university vice-chancellor and I run through that checklist myself. Are you doing this? Are you doing this? Are you doing this? It is vitally important, and not just for those who are self-isolating. As you point out, there are limitations on those at university, which is why they have worked hand in hand with their student unions to ensure there are social activities online. They will not be the same, but all this stuff needs to be done and layered up so students feel they are not alone and they are not experiencing those problems.

Q311 **Fleur Anderson:** There is a lot being asked of students. They have to seek tests if they notice the symptoms themselves. They have to check their online learning. Is it good enough? Is it up to standard? There is a lot expected of them, so it is important that the university can be proactive in contacting them and asking them about their wellbeing. That needs additional staff support, and that in turn needs funding.

I have questions about university staff and support staff. University staff were having issues and going out on strike before Covid struck. Those issues remain—the issues of casualisation and more being expected of staff—and now they are expected to go online and adapt the way they teach. There is a lot expected, and there is huge demoralisation for many staff. Are you meeting with unions such as UCU, GMB and others to talk about the issues they had before, which are now potentially being



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accelerated, but also about support staff, those on zero-hours contracts and hourly paid staff who might be doing fewer hours because of the lack of face-to-face tuition?

Some staff are expected to do more for less, definitely in many universities, and there are cuts that put more on staff, and there are mental health issues for staff as well. What are you doing? Are you working with the unions on those things?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, I regularly meet with Jo Grady at UCU and also with the students' union, and yesterday I met with Unison, so I am definitely working with unions to hear their concerns. Interestingly, Unison was much more pro about the reopening of campuses and the importance of that for staff and students.

With regard to the pressures being added to certain staff, I agree. We are in the midst of a pandemic. Everybody is being asked to do more and to go further and do things they never anticipated doing before. The universities should all have shared their risk assessments with staff, made them feel comfortable and welcome coming back, which was always going to be quite unnerving, especially for those who have not been back for months. Nobody is saying any of this stuff is easy. It is not at all. I see the Chair is trying to get me to move on.

Chair: That is fine. It was a very good answer. I do not know if Fleur would agree, but I thought that was an important answer.

Q312 **Fleur Anderson:** If you were to come back, Minister, and I hope you would come back and talk to us in a few months' time or further on in the year, would you be confident that some of the issues that are being raised by unions were being addressed and not getting worse, and sliding more and more towards staff being very dissatisfied and leaving the profession?

Michelle Donelan: We are talking about different staff here. I know my counterpart in BEIS, Amanda Solloway, is working very hard on some of those issues about researchers and researchers' contracts, and I work closely with her. We are also talking about the ramifications of Covid on some of those jobs, and we all hope that in six months' time we will be in a much better position.

I speak to a number of staff members when I go to universities, and I sometimes hear very different voices coming from them than are coming from the likes of UCU. Let us not forget that some staff are so excited to be back in the classroom. This is their passion, and they too have suffered from isolation being at home.

Picking up on one of the points you mentioned before, about asking students to do all these things being such a big ask, one thing I prioritise and this Government prioritise is making sure we do not treat students differently. We have not done what Scotland has done. We have not imposed punitive measures for students that are not akin to the rest of



the population. We have not, for instance, said students cannot go to the pub or they cannot do this, or they can do this when other people cannot. I think that is really important, and it is important that we do not demonise students because the vast majority of students are doing what they are meant to be doing and are struggling through this pandemic just like everybody else.

Q313 Chair: I understand from what we have been reading in the press over the last couple of days that exams are taking place but are going to be delayed by a few weeks? Could you confirm that, and could you say what impact that will have on UCAS timetables and university timetables?

Michelle Donelan: I believe the Secretary of State asked Ofqual back in June to explore this as an option, because obviously we are always thinking ahead to the next round of exams. On exams in general, my view and the Department's view is that they are the best and fairest form of assessment. The Secretary of State is going to make a statement on this later in the week, so it would be inappropriate if I pre-empted and stole his thunder by delivering any of those details here today.

Q314 Chair: There will be a statement from the Secretary of State for Education this week in Parliament. Are you confident that, whatever is announced, of which I am sure you will have advance sight, universities and UCAS will be able to cope with a new timetable?

Michelle Donelan: I work with universities on any changes possible. We have the lead time to do anything that the Secretary of State may announce and the flexibility will be there. The message I have from universities is that they are prepared to be as flexible as possible to facilitate a smooth running for students, and everybody knows—

Q315 Chair: Will the term time start as normal, for example?

Michelle Donelan: If term time needs to be moved slightly to accommodate any potential change in examinations, that can be done quite straightforwardly.

Q316 Chair: I think you did an extraordinary job following the exams controversy in trying to get students' first choice of university. I think it was 70% in the end. Is that right?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, and of the additional 11,000 who had their results changed through the CAG process, we managed to get down to under 800 the number who had to be given a deferred offer. Obviously I would have preferred that figure to be nought, but we did get it right down.

Q317 Chair: Will it have an impact on next year's first choice places for students?

Michelle Donelan: No. That is something I have been very clear on. I do not want next year to be disadvantaged. The overall number of deferrals only went up by 0.2% next year, so it is not true to say we have a mass



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cohort of deferred students who are suddenly going to take all the places next year, because that is certainly not the reality. I will continue to build extra capacity within those courses that particularly did have a few deferred.

Q318 Chair: I am going to ask you some questions outside the current controversy and difficulties of Covid before I finish. You are probably aware of the *Daily Telegraph* report that came out a few days ago that suggested that almost 18% of universities, that is 29 out of 133, have not yet adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of anti-Semitism. I think the Oxbridge universities have refused to adopt it as well currently. Is it not strange that this has occurred?

Universities seem to be very active in pulling down statues and so on, but when it comes to the Jewish faith they seem to be reluctant to adopt what is now an international recognition of the horrors of the holocaust. Is this not shameful? What can you do to ensure they adopt the Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition?

Michelle Donelan: I want every university to adopt this definition. So did my predecessors, who wrote several times to universities on this matter, including the Secretary of State, I believe. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government did as well, and it has not shifted the dial. That is the reality. We are not seeing enough of these universities adopting the definition, and it is simply not good enough. It has reached the point that I am now looking at other measures we can utilise to make it happen. My message today would be that I urge universities to do this, otherwise we are going to look for solutions to ensure you do so.

Q319 Chair: The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Robert Jenrick, suggested that institutions might face funding cuts if they refused to adopt this. When you say you are looking at other measures, what real measures are there? It seems incredible that universities are focused on removing statues yet, when it comes to something as important as the holocaust, so many seem to turn a blind eye because I think people of the Jewish faith are not taken as seriously as they should be.

Michelle Donelan: It would be a bit early for me to pre-empt exactly what measure we would use, but my message here is clear. I urge all universities to adopt it. If not, we will be forced into taking action to ensure they do.

Q320 Chair: The Government announced last week they would make higher education loans more flexible, allowing students to fund studies on different courses at different institutions spaced out across their lifetime. I think that is a huge welcome boost to lifelong learning. Will there be more to come from the Government's response to the Augar review?



Michelle Donelan: Indeed, we are going to announce our response in line with the spending review, and this is a very important announcement we will be making in terms of FE and HE reform.

Q321 **Chair:** I mentioned the Open University earlier. Would you not agree that, if anyone provides a Rolls-Royce system of online learning and support for the disadvantaged, they are a model example of that? The vice-chancellor has, in essence, said that the Prime Minister's announcement highlights a wider point about parity for support in academic and technical routes throughout HE across England, maintenance support being a key example.

Part-time students, who we know have declined significantly, are only eligible if they are studying towards a degree, and distance learners are excluded. This means that nine out of 10 part-time students cannot get a maintenance loan, and you know this is a barrier to the take-up of part-time learning. Part-time students are also excluded from childcare grants and the parents learning allowance. What consideration have you given to extending financial support available to part-time learners? That would make a huge difference, often to people on low incomes. They might be single parents who are desperate to study but cannot afford to do it financially because of some of the restrictions I mentioned.

Michelle Donelan: I believe our current higher education system is far too rigid at the moment. It favours and pushes people to do the three-year degree course, and that is at the heart of some of the stuff the Prime Minister was announcing the other day, allowing much more flexibility that would assist those, including those doing part time, to study in chunks and at the time in their life that is the best for them, rather than having to do three years at 18 and then it is much harder later on in their career.

Q322 **Chair:** What are you going to do to support part-time learners financially?

Michelle Donelan: They would benefit from the lifelong learning allowance that the Prime Minister announced last week, which Parliament is going to legislate to fulfil. Part-time learners are something we continually look at. It fell off a cliff over the last decade, and that is extremely challenging.

Q323 **Chair:** Will you speak to the DWP and the DFE? They should not be excluded from childcare grants and the parents learning allowance, surely.

Michelle Donelan: We keep all those things under review, and I will certainly pick those particular ones up with DWP.

Chair: Thank you. Jonathan Gullis, good to have you back.

Q324 **Jonathan Gullis:** I am sorry for technical issues, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to come back in. Building on what the Chair was saying regarding holocaust recognition, one of the worst examples I



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have come across is from a place where I grew up, Warwick University, where you had Dr Goldie Osuri declaring that anti-Semitism in mainstream politics was an Israeli lobby kind of idea.

This was then investigated by the head of sociology, Professor Virinder Kalra, who had already expressed their public opposition to the IHRA and then decided that the appeal from the students was rejected. Warwick University have an awful lot of questions to answer here, and I think it is utterly disgusting they have acted in this way and decided to ignore the voice of students, particularly Jewish voices, in that university, and instead protect these professors or doctors who are quite clearly out of touch with mainstream views.

I think it is now time for us to send a very firm message. These people will either lose their ability to teach in these universities, or those universities are going to face severe fines because, as the Chair said, the holocaust is not something that should even be up for debate. The fact that universities think it is, I think, is utterly repugnant.

Michelle Donelan: I could not agree with you more on the fact that the holocaust is not open for debate, and that anti-Semitism is completely unacceptable in any walk of life, especially in universities that are teaching young people on campus who are listening actively to the voices of some of these very well respected lecturers. Where we do see cases like this, I am more than happy to call them out but we need to circle back to what the Chair was talking about and make sure that all universities accept the IHRA. If that means we have to make it happen, we will do so.

Q325 **Chair:** To be clear, you said you might bring through measures to make universities do this. When would they come in?

Michelle Donelan: We are exploring all these things. I think it would be premature for me to set deadlines.

Q326 **Chair:** Are we talking sooner rather than later?

Michelle Donelan: We are actively exploring them at the moment.

Q327 **Fleur Anderson:** I would fully endorse your taking action on universities taking up the IHRA definition, and taking action on that within their universities as well. These people are teaching young people, and it is shocking that they have not so far.

I have another question about intimate relationships between staff and students, which have been banned by only three of our universities. It leaves clear concerns about abuses of power that can happen within our universities. Is that something you are taking up and taking action on?

Michelle Donelan: We have to remember in the context of everything we have discussed today that, in law, universities are autonomous institutions. That means they have freedom over things like what you have just referenced, like any business would in terms of their own internal policy. It is not something we can intervene in. Of course, we can



urge best practice and we can work with sector bodies to reiterate that and to identify issues we think are borne out by those concerns.

Q328 **Fleur Anderson:** Is it something we could ask for a report on to find out more about whether power is being abused?

Michelle Donelan: Certainly I can work with sector bodies to assess, yes. It is something that potentially UUK, or one of the other sector bodies, may want to do a report on.

Chair: I would say that, although universities are autonomous, when the Government really want to do something across universities, they usually can make it happen, especially with someone of your capabilities, Michelle. A final question from Jonathan Gullis

Q329 **Jonathan Gullis:** Is it fair that this year's cohort of A-level students will be competing with students who deferred from the last academic year, some having received inflated centre-assessed grades? What will the Department do to address this?

Michelle Donelan: The Secretary of State will be making a statement on exactly what is going to happen around exams next year, and I know his intention, and the intention of Nick Gibb and the whole Department, is to ensure those exams are as fair as possible and can lead to the qualifications those students deserve, given all they have been through and all they continue to go through as we are in the midst of the pandemic.

In relation to them competing with deferred students, despite what you might have seen in some of the media reports, there has only been a 0.2% increase in the number of students who have deferred. We are looking at very similar numbers of deferred students to what we had last year, so I am confident they are not competing with a large cohort.

However, I will be working with the sector, as I did over the summer, to ensure we can continue to build extra capacity so that next year's students are not disadvantaged. In the summer we allowed additional money for capital, we removed caps, we removed controls and we worked with them to bolster that supply, and it is something that I will continue in my conversations with the task force because I think we all agree that last year's cohort potentially had one of the hardest times and continue to do so, along with those who are now at university.

Chair: Thank you. I appreciate the Minister appearing before us, especially at a very difficult time. I know you have not been well for the last couple of days, but it is really great to have you. On behalf of the Committee, I thank everyone working in universities—all the staff, the lecturers, the tutors, the support staff and management—and wish them all good health, and I also wish all the students every possible good health and safety, in what is an incredibly tough time. Thank you for the key information about the public health line for universities and also the announcement that there will be a statement this week on exam



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timetables, which will be very useful to us. We wish you well.