Written evidence submitted by hope3g.com

The Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services-
Submission from hope3g.com

hope3g.com is an educational technology charity based in Southwark, London. We are a group of professionals and volunteers seeking to facilitate the visionary idea of twelve children. This idea was to create a digital learning platform that children from across the world could access for free and that would also lift some of the additional burdens on teachers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Terms of reference

The Board of Trustees at hope3g.com believe that the charity can make a substantial contribution to the consultation regarding two of the terms of reference stipulated by the Committee. These are detailed below.

For further information on hope3g.com, please visit: https://youtu.be/qqxWJ-KPgXQ

Section 1: The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers.

1. Critical workers have continued to rely on schools throughout the first period of lockdown and teaching professionals have been required to produce high quality educational content in addition to their existing workload. Only through embracing technological solutions to this situation will teachers have the time to continue to supervise children, provide feedback on academic work and provide pastoral support for the most vulnerable students.

2. In preparation for a second series of lockdowns, whether local or national, the education sector and government must learn from the first lockdown and embrace educational technology. To take the example of hope3g.com, we are working with businesses, schools, educators and children alike to provide high quality content for all users. By augmenting existing lesson plans with visual aides, graphics and innovative technologies we are enhancing the education that children can experience whilst also reducing the amount of work that individual teachers have to do. Furthermore, the bank of online lessons that are being built will be available to any teacher around the world thereby reducing the need for planning the same lessons over and over again.

3. Educational technologies will enable parents to harmonise their working days with the learning schedule of their children. Should the UK go back into a full lockdown, this harmonisation will be essential for maintaining educational standards as well as ensuring that parents continue to be economically productive. This harmonisation will also reduce the reliance on a physical classroom environment for the children of critical workers, and thus enable greater social distancing between children and educators.

4. The government's guidance regarding the definition of key workers has been clear however many educators are worried about what their status would mean for childcare. As both childcare workers and teachers are considered as 'critical' workers there was a fear that full isolation would never take place as the children of teachers would be ferried between different support bubbles. Consequently, the transmission of the disease could still take place and, although children may be asymptomatic, teachers would be exposed to the virus.

5. Educational technologies are part of a solution to this problem. By ensuring that children are able to receive high-quality educational instruction through a digital platform, children are not required to be in a specific location under the proximate supervision of an adult. In such a scenario, children can continue to learn through educational technology and can be supervised either remotely or in a socially distanced way. If teachers do become exposed to COVID-19, their children can remain in their bubble and contain the virus whilst accessing engaging educational content. Additionally those teachers who are considered as 'vulnerable' by the NHS due to underlying health conditions could continue to set work and support their students if they are forced to isolate for an extended period. Teachers are critical workers by the government's own definition and innovative technologies, coupled with existing government policies such as the provision of laptop devices for low-income families, will be a way of supporting teachers in this uncertain time.

Section 2: What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency?

1. The resilience of the education sector is of utmost importance for children, educators, and families. At present many parents remain unaware of the government's initiatives to mitigate the negative educational impact of COVID-19 and this had resulted in a significant boost for the private tuition sector.[1] Although for many private tutors this was a welcome boost to their income in a time of economic uncertainty, paying for additional assistance is not an option for millions of families with low levels of disposable income. This is especially true in instances where a family member has been made redundant as a consequence of the pandemic.

2. Resilience should be understood in two ways. Firstly, policy-makers should consider how schools, teachers and families can remain financially strong despite the additional costs to local government that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the lockdown period, educators have

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[1]David Batty, 'UK School Closures Prompt Boom in Private Tuition' (27 March 2020). Available at
    https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/mar/27/school-closures-prompt-boom-in-private-tuition-online-isolation

been expected to continue to provide high quality lessons and teaching resources despite negative externalities beyond their control. This will undoubtedly increase the time pressures of those in the teaching profession and add a layer of technical complexity for which many educators may not have been adequately trained. Consequently, a policy response focused on resilience would prioritise the upskilling of teachers to become more comfortable with educational technologies.

3. Regarding schools, the National Education Union (NEU) estimates that 83% of schools in England have faced reductions in their budgets in real terms when compared with 2015 levels.[2] The Board of Trustees at hope3g.com are also aware that the inability to form an Executive in Northern Ireland between January 2017 and January 2020 had a negative knock on effect for schools funding. This view is also supported by the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT).[3] Given the existing challenges facing school budgets across the UK, the onset of the pandemic revealed the need to future-proof schools through investment in technological solutions. It would be erroneous to simply outfit all schools with highly complex technologies without providing teachers with adequate training and conducting a wider conversation on the reconfiguration of education delivery. It is therefore the view of the Board that the government should focus on intermediate technologies. These are systems and equipment that requires minimal teacher training whilst also providing students with the access to high-quality educational content.

4. The government has brought forth proposals to provide students with equipment and infrastructure that would facilitate remote learning. As of August 2020, the Department for Education records that 220,494 laptops and tablets have been delivered to local authorities or academy trusts with an additional 50,984 4G wireless routers having also been dispatched.[4] Whilst this is a welcome development the government must also ensure that providing such equipment does not have a long-term financial impact on families. By design this project has been aimed at families on very low incomes but the additional cost to energy bills to use this equipment must also be considered. This is especially the case for families in receipt of free school meals where any increase in the cost of living would be keenly felt. There is also an open question about the cost of maintenance for government-provided equipment. Parents are unsure as to whether or not the government will make funds available for repairing any damage to the equipment, and given the fast-paced world of technological change parents also need confidence that any equipment will be upgraded if distance learning becomes a new fixture of educational instruction. Although some families will be able to easily adapt to home learning, a long-term shift away from centralised educational establishments like schools and colleges will require regular state-funded equipment upgrades.

5. Secondly, resilience should also be considered in regards to educational standards and this is comprised of two components- the quality of teaching and the attainment of students. Although moving

[2]National Education Union, 'Calculating schoolcuts.org.uk for England' (2019). Available at https://neu.org.uk/media/6831/view (accessed 17/09/2020).

[3]National Association of Headteachers, 'It's Make of Break Time for Schools- Northern Ireland' (2019). Available at https://www.naht.org.uk/our-priorities/school-funding-in-crisis-join-the-campaign/school-funding-in-crisis-northern-ireland/ (accessed 17/09/2020).

[4]Department for Education, 'Devices and 4G Wireless Routers Data as of 27 August' (2020), p.4.

learning to digital platforms is a necessary step to contain COVID-19, the dynamic environment of in-person teaching cannot fully be replicated in an exclusively online setting. The government would be unwise to seek to simply maintain educational standards. Moving to a system more reliant on educational technologies should be considered as an opportunity to raise standards. The government should endeavour to make online lessons better than classroom-based instruction. By integrating technologies, graphics, audio clips, videos and games, online lessons can build improve the quality of teaching without diminishing the depth or breadth of material covered.

6. Regarding the attainment of students, the complications caused by the cancellation of formal exams revealed the difficult balance between ongoing COVID-19 resilience and the need to maintain educational excellence. In our view the solution lies in creating a more pluralized educational system that caters to the individual academic and emotional needs of students. Educators have long been seeking to try and construct lessons that cater to each of the learning styles of students. Shifting instruction to an online platform would more easily facilitate this change, raising the attainment levels of students who are more unresponsive to conventional educational instruction in the process.

7. The strongest form of contingency plan would centre educational technologies emanating from organisations that are not motivated by the profit motive. Education technology provided by companies tend to come with high price tags attached in order to finance investor returns. Many schools have faced reductions in funding in recent years and initiatives with high costs of entry will only deprive children of access to these vital online tools. Adopting the products and services of a charity would also provide greater value for money for taxpayers as no upfront cost would be required to sign up thousands of children and young people to digital learning tools. Similarly, the United States has seen a marketization of education which, in the case of primary and secondary schools, has removed the welfare of children as its primary focus.[5] The introduction of high-cost products is a key plank of such an approach to education with the consequence of exacerbating existing attainment inequalities. Adopting the services of a charity or non-profit is, therefore, a more financially sustainable public policy approach and an approach that ensures that the improvement of students' attainment remains of paramount importance.

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[5]See Lesley Bartlett and others, 'The Marketization of Education: Public Schools for Private Ends', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 33.1 (2002), pp.5-29.