

## Written evidence submitted by Mrs Pamela Newman

*NOTE OF EVIDENCE FOR EDUCATION COMMITTEE**The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services*

I am writing in response to the Committee's call for evidence for the inquiry.

I am in my seventies and solely responsible for the care and education of my 15 year old grandson. He has just started Year 11 in secondary school. In 2021 he should be taking eight GCSEs but may not be ready to take more than one or two.

The Education Secretary said parents would cause a massive dent to the future of their children if they did not send them back to school. The massive dent was and is already there. Like many parents and carers I saw and continue to feel the serious damage caused by school closures and the inadequacy of remote learning for many teenage GCSE students. I found by asking others with children attending different schools and in different London boroughs that provision and quality varied greatly. Some teenagers did not engage with remote learning at all, or did little. Most state schools, their teachers and students had no prior preparation for a remote learning regime. That devised de novo by my grandson's school essentially required him to sit in front of a computer from 8.30am until 3.30pm following an equivalent of his in-school timetable without teachers. This meant the household as well as the student was governed by the school times for morning and afternoon registration and review sessions, breaks, lunchtimes, and even performing PE. For me and many trying to work from home this was unrealistic, impracticable, and unmanageable. It was not sustainable.

On 16 March I was unable to buy bread needed for our evening meal as the supermarket shelves were empty. On 23 March few parents and carers were prepared for home schooling. Our reality was that remote learning became a time consuming tiring charade beset by access and Meet codes and daily last minute instructions. Moreover without parent access to the new phenomenon of an online classroom we could not see what had been done or not done. Meantime I struggled with fear of the virus to go food shopping. As my grandson was not required to attend school, of fear did not go outside of the house for over a month, and could not meet his friends, he and they eventually spent the best part of six months mostly playing computer games and chatting and texting all night on their phones. He has yet to re-adjust to going back to school. He said, "I feel as if I have already left school but now I have to go back and take GCSEs."

This year's distressing exam grade debacle could be as nothing compared with next year. This year a high number of students were eventually enabled to 'pass' and thus qualify for college and university. It seems to me that next year like my grandson far fewer will be ready to take exams even if they are not held until July. They know this. It is debilitating. It does not encourage engagement and learning. It fuels anxiety. Such students who are up to

almost a year behind ought to re-start their studies if 'catch up' will be insufficient to bridge the gap. If there is too much to make up, more time needs to be provided.

The exam content changes suggested by Ofqual were small. That was not surprising given ministerial direction about not dropping content and the No 10 edict about exams going ahead as normal next year, as if nothing had happened and as if by magic the virus had disappeared. Regrettably, the catch up tutoring scheme announced months ago will not start until November at the earliest. Moreover the amount set aside appears tiny compared with an immense need. Meanwhile, in a state of continuing uncertainty parents and carers have been given no information about the scheme. Similarly the amounts being provided to each borough for additional pastoral support appear to be insufficient.

The pandemic and school closures have shown that the secondary school exam system needs a fundamental overhaul. In the best of times, an exam system based on and timebound by the admission procedures of universities overlooks the needs and variability of the employment market as well as differing rates of pupil development. Further, cramming all the exams into a few weeks every year causes enormous stress.

Greater flexibility and resilience is needed. Like driving tests, exams should be taken when pupils are ready. All of the commonly taken GCSEs should be available at least several times a year not just in the summer. To take an exam in the autumn or spring should not require a pre-requisite of having previously taken the exam. Most, with obvious exceptions such as Art and the spoken component of language courses, should be directly and automatically computer marked. And do we really need a 1-9 grading system in respect of exam performance?

In my view:

- Urgent, substantial funding should be provided to schools to enable them now to offer and provide full re-start face to face in-school courses for GCSE students.
- Those students who restart their studies should not be expected to take GCSEs before 2022 unless ready to do so.
- All the most commonly taken GCSEs should be available at least three times a year (no re-sit prerequisite).
- Students should be expected and enabled to take one or more exams as and when they are ready.
- GCSE exams should, wherever possible, be in the form of automatically marked on-line computer tests.
- Where it is necessary to provide written answers, or show working, students should be expected and entitled to type their answers into an on-line exam paper.
- Handwritten answer papers which require further processing before marking should be not be used except where essential.
- All secondary schools should be provided with ample IT resources for in-class student use not least to obviate the need for schools, such as my grandson's relying on students using mobile phones.
- Remote learning systems should be inspected by Ofsted and the inspections should include looking closely at how well students are taught to use the systems.

- The use of any algorithm or other device should be strictly limited to solely ensuring a fair balance between exam boards and should not include any information about the performance of schools or other test centres.

September 2020