

Written evidence submitted by the Education Select Committee

SUMMARY OF MEETING

Monday, 4 May 2020, 09.30-11.30am

Virtual (Teams) discussion between Members of the Education Select Committee and Carol Iddon from Action for Children, Geoff Barton from the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and Mark Russell from The Children's Society.

An audio recording of this meeting is available on the House of Commons [Youtube Channel](#).

Committee Members in attendance via remote participation

Robert Halfon (Chair), Fleur Anderson, Apsana Begum, Tom Hunt, David Johnston, Ian Mearns, David Simmonds, Christian Wakeford.

Objectives of the session

The session was an opportunity for the Committee to explore issues relating to the effect of Covid-19, including school closures, on the health of children and young people.

Online learning, support for vulnerable children and catch-up provision

The Committee asked about online learning and whether it should be a requirement for every school to offer some form of online provision.

Geoff Barton suggested that schools who do not have their own range of online provision should be directing parents to online learning platforms, for example highlighting which resources from Oak Academy or BBC Bitesize are most appropriate. Schools should support and inform parents about the online offer. He stated the importance of planned curriculum rather than “a pick and mix of different activities”. He emphasised that schools remain the hub of the community, and schools should be sending something home to each family on a frequent basis.

Mark Russell highlighted that issues around digital deprivation for some children are “very significant”. The Government has announced a packet of measures to get IT equipment to disadvantaged young people, however Mark Russell stated that it may still be two weeks before this goes out to children, and:

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if you're living in a family where you already have poor access to the internet maybe you're in a rural area but you haven't got the right kit, then it's really hard for those children to participate in online learning.

The Committee asked about the risk of children being exposed to online harms in the context of increased online access.

Geoff Barton suggested that parents and carers have responsibility to oversee schoolwork and monitor children's online use. Carol Iddon agreed that the risks to children online have increased, this is particularly a risk for isolated children. She highlighted that parents do take seriously their responsibilities to monitor their children's online activity, but parents are also under pressure during these unprecedented times and are unlikely to have the time to constantly monitor their child's usage.

The Committee asked about Government measures to help vulnerable children, and whether anything is missing.

Geoff Barton highlighted that the term 'vulnerable children' may have caused confusion:

The problem with using the term vulnerable, I think, is there was lots of different perception of what it meant. And of course, it's kind of contradicted by the wider narrative which is, if you are vulnerable you should be staying at home and sort of isolating and I think at the beginning of this process. We weren't clear enough on, who are the children who we are talking about, who should be a priority.

He further suggested that this group should be a priority for when schools reopen. He stated that in addition to sending out teaching resources, schools are making contact with vulnerable children and their parents, to check in.

The Committee asked whether a catch-up premium is needed to help those children who may be falling behind educationally.

Geoff Barton stated:

Of all the things that are being suggested it is the catch-up premium, I think, that we would welcome the most, because what that then does is to recognise that there is an issue for those young people that then allows the school or the college to decide what is the right course of action.

He emphasised it would not necessarily be beneficial for pupils to have "a cavalry of different people" rushing in to do mentoring and one-to-one coaching.

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He reiterated the importance of schools being responsible for deciding what is appropriate for their pupils.

The Committee asked whether school buildings could remain open over the summer, for charities or retired teachers to provide extra tuition or catchup to help left-behind pupils.

Geoff Barton stated that teachers will need to start by assessing where the gaps are, so that they can diagnostically start to fill these gaps. He suggested that it is difficult to see how a retired teacher or volunteer not familiar with the curriculum can do more than provide activities. He highlighted Education Endowment Foundation research showing 1-1 teaching is the most effective use of pupil premium funding, but emphasised that catchup needs to be done after teachers' diagnostic assessment of what each pupil needs.

The Committee asked about a recent Sutton Trust report which suggested that around 25% of A level pupils are not receiving any work from their schools.

Geoff Barton suggested that the Sutton Trust report has highlighted issues which will need to be given attention to. He highlighted that schools are working on many fronts trying to do their best for a whole range of students, particularly the most vulnerable.

He suggested that providing year 13 resources could be difficult for schools as these pupils will be waiting for A level results and the DfE and Ofqual have made it clear that no additional work will be taken into account for examinations. He suggested that some schools will have asked these pupils to think about their future degree or qualification and tailor their own reading. He suggested that for year 13 pupils with university places, universities should be making available a range of appropriate resources to help these students transition into higher education.

The Committee asked about online engagement with learning and digital deprivation.

Phased openings, risk assessments and PPE, and supporting children and young people through reopening

The Committee asked what risk assessments are needed to ensure schools are providing a safe environment on reopening

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Geoff Barton suggested that guidance would be needed on what an identification process for risk assessments would look like, how it might work, and who might carry it out. The sector would expect the Department for Education to provide the insights, but school leaders would think through the logistics. Additional resources targeted to schools would also be useful.

The Committee asked about PPE availability and social distancing measures for reopening schools.

Geoff Barton further highlighted the importance of parental perceptions about whether it is safe to send children back to school, and that there are currently “mixed messages as to whether PPE will be necessary, who needs it”. Schools will need absolute clarity about what social distancing looks like in a school setting, where for example there are narrow corridors. He suggested that when schools do reopen, they will not be able to move back into a normal curriculum straight away- some staff may not be able to be at work due to illness or caring responsibilities. A different kind of curriculum to help re-socialise children might be a necessary steppingstone.

Geoff Barton highlighted the need for strong scientific reassurance as to what social distancing means in a school context, and what PPE will be needed. He emphasised that schools may not have one hundred percent of their staff at work. He suggested that there is logic to bringing in the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, but some there is also ongoing thinking in terms of which cohorts to prioritise, for example those in the middle of GCSEs or A-levels. He suggested that if time allowed a rota system could be beneficial. This would:

bring every child in before the summer holiday start so that every child has some experience of the normality and routines of school, and seeing familiar people there, even if it's only for two days. Because I think that would make September so much easier if we have some kind of normality there.

The Committee asked what support would be needed for children and young people as schools begin to reopen.

Geoff Barton said that children and young people would need the routines of school life, together with the reassurance of conversations. The sector would require guidance on how to balance usual routines with measures to help ease pupils back in. Perhaps every young person, together with their parents, might have a conversation with their tutor or teacher.

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Mark Russell suggested that schools could do well-being checks on children as they return. He suggested that in practice, this could work as teachers sitting down with each child on their return and checking in to work out what support that child will need going forward. He further highlighted that a lot of children may need help reintegrating into a big crowd having been in isolation for a long period.

Carol Iddon highlighted that children with SEND and children with physical disabilities will need tailored follow up support when they return to school. Social distancing will be particularly difficult in settings where intensive physical care is provided.

Free School Meals, nutrition and school holiday hunger

The Committee asked how well the new Free School Meal (FSM) voucher system is working.

Geoff Barton stated: “there were very significant issues early on with the free school meal voucher system”, and the website continues to have technical problems. He spoke of a school with 350 FSM eligible pupils which is having continued problems with vouchers, and has £15,000 worth of vouchers in “suspended animation”. Some schools are making their own arrangements, or falling back on old arrangements. Geoff Barton further highlighted:

It's an ongoing set of problems without a doubt....school business leaders, head teachers, deputy heads are getting up in the middle of the night or early in the morning when they think that the traffic to the website is going to make it easier for them, and trying to bulk buy the vouchers...they wouldn't be doing that if the system was running without flaws.

Both the Children’s Society and Action for Children highlighted eligible supermarkets not being close enough to where pupils and their families live as one of the main issues. Geoff Barton further suggested that it would be “hugely helpful” if Co-op stores were part of the voucher scheme. He highlighted that there have been examples where families have found vouchers irredeemable at the end of their shop, which leaves parents “not just without the food but feeling publicly humiliated by it”.

Mark Russell suggested that “there are significant implementation difficulties...we really want to encourage the Government to rethink whether or not cash payments might be the best way forward for this”. He stated that Children’s Society welcome the extension of FSM to pupils with no recourse to

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public funding, but this is “only one small part of the immense need that those particular pupils have”.

Geoff Barton stated that there are situations where schools are having to provide workarounds where the system has proved unusable, with examples of schools are putting together packs of food and asking parents to come and collect them.

The Committee asked whether additional families are eligible for FSM as a result of financial difficulties, and about food quality and availability.

Mark Russell stated:

significant numbers of families in the country are experiencing real financial hardship right now. And the school voucher program, whilst well intentioned, has not delivered the results on the ground to some of these vulnerable children. We're particularly working with a number of families who have no recourse to public funding, many of whom their parents have lost their jobs or their own zero hours contracts.

He further encouraged the Government to publicise the extension of FSM, as some families, for example those not eligible for benefits, may not know their children are FSM eligible. He highlighted that universal FSM offer for the youngest children is not continuing during Covid-19 closures, which adds around £400 per year per child to food bills. He suggested that one option could be to extend FSM vouchers to children who had the universal offer.

Carol Iddon raised issues around the availability and quality of food:

We're actually providing them with food parcels through our emergency fund and we're working with local food banks and with local supermarkets, as well as the schools, to supplement some of those food parcels with fresh produce, which is very, very difficult for our families to access, particularly if they're shopping in local stores that are probably not stocking anything other than processed foods. So there's a whole raft of issues around the impact on their physical health, as a consequence of poor quality food that they may be accessing.

The Committee asked whether Covid-19 is likely to exacerbate school holiday hunger over the summer holidays, and what the long-term health implications of a period of food poverty are likely to be.

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Mark Russell agreed that this was likely, stating that the Children's Society would like the Government to extend free school meals provision over the summer holidays, because school holiday hunger is an issue. He highlighted that this might be worsened by Covid-19: 'loss of earnings, families' job insecurity and also the higher costs of children being at home, mean there's a significantly higher risk of food hunger'.

Carol Iddon highlighted:

poverty generally leads to poor health outcomes, and we are very concerned about the long-term impact that food poverty will have on children, particularly those in primary school, but not exclusively to those, and their physical health may be affected and their ability to then therefore learn. Going into school hungry you're not going to learn.

Physical and mental wellbeing and support for children and young people

The Committee asked about levels of physical activity and children and young people's physical wellbeing

Carol Iddon said that there are challenges for both obesity levels and the physical health of children. She reiterated concerns about children's access to fruits and vegetables:

we're really concerned about the level of processed foods that children will be eating during this period because it's cheap, and it's easy to get hold off and there's real challenges for both the obesity levels but also the physical health of children, and we really need to think about doing more work to give children access to fruits and fresh veg

Mark Russell highlighted that a broad and balanced curriculum with physical activity, alongside promoting mental wellbeing, will be needed when schools reopen. He suggested that the Government should be communicating directly to children to emphasise the need for regular physical activity.

The Committee heard from witnesses about the targeted provision that would be needed for children and young people with pre-existing mental health conditions.

Carol Iddon told the Committee that some children who had mental health problems before the COVID-19 crisis may need specialist support and won't be able to catch up on their education if their mental health is compromised. She

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emphasised that there are a range of programmes available, with organisations like Action for Children and The Children's Society reshaping their mental health service delivery.

Mark Russell emphasised that schools play “such an important role in identifying mental health issues in young people”. He suggested that the Government and schools should help signpost parents to mental health support services that are still in place. He suggested the Government should enable Local Authorities to put in place a mental health recovery service, or provide additional budget for this, to support young people whose mental health has deteriorated throughout this period.

The Committee asked about issues with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

Carol Iddon said that “CAMHS is already creaking”, and the service's high threshold criteria would likely exclude a number of children. She suggested that focusing on CAMHS could exclude support for those children who do not meet the criteria. However, there are a range of other services that do specific work with children. Mark Russell was also concerned that CAMHS provision remains patchy and that progress made on waiting times could be at risk, which could contribute to a longer-term decline in children and young people's mental health. He said that while digital services have been a “lifeline” to the young people, there were limitations to the utility of those services. He also expressed concern that the COVID-19 crisis could create a spike in referrals. He suggested that local recovery plans should be put in place for children's health, along with a COVID-19 recovery fund.

The Committee asked about the risks of increased social media exposure on children and young people's mental health.

Mark Russell highlighted that while there was some evidence that safeguarding risks had worsened, social media also had positive benefits at this time for children who might be feeling very isolated. Social media was a tool to help them keep in touch with their friends and with each other. However, research shows that excessive use is linked to poor mental health and low sense of worth.

Support for children and young people with SEND

The Committee asked about the wellbeing of children with SEND, and the availability of SEND appropriate educational resources.

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Carol Iddon stressed that teacher-child relationships are critical for children and young people with SEND, who may have lost their coping mechanisms during school closures. She also highlighted that understanding social distancing could be a real challenge for some children with SEND once schools return.

The Committee mentioned concerns over the suitability of the Oak Academy's SEND content being suitable for those with dyslexia and dyspraxia. Geoff Barton stated that the Oak Academy resources are not perfect or comprehensive, but he suggested that they provide an important step forward.

Recommendations to help vulnerable children and young people catch up as schools reopen

The Committee asked for one or two things witnesses would recommend to ensure that vulnerable children are looked after and catch up as schools are reopened.

Geoff Barton felt that the response to the crisis might be an opportunity to realign the education system, recognising the needs of the “forgotten third” of children by adapting the qualification system which currently requires 30 per cent of them to get a 3, a 2, or a 1.

Carol Iddon set out the need for the education system to be more inclusive. She noted the importance of all sectors working together in a multiagency way to ensure that disadvantaged children don't fall through the gaps. She called on the Government to “that have been made previously that resulted in early help and early intervention services being decimated across local authorities”.

Mark Russell said he would encourage the Government to increase child benefit for every child across the country because a significant number of children are falling through the gaps. He welcomed the lifting of the no recourse to public funds condition on free school meals but asked that the whole condition be lifted as a number of families - many of whom might be keyworkers – are experiencing financial hardship with this condition on their immigration status. He emphasised that the Government needed to find a way to communicate directly to children in language that they understand, reassuring them that the country would come through this crisis. He reiterated the importance of developing measures of children's well-being

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to ensure that we have the data to target those resources in the most appropriate way for the best impact for children, particularly the most vulnerable.

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