Written evidence submitted by Challenge Partners

Challenge Partners written evidence to the Education Select Committee, submitted by CEO Dr Kate Chhatwal

Challenge Partners works with schools across the country to reduce educational inequality and improve the life chances of all children. We do this through peer-led programmes to facilitate school improvement and professional development, and share great practice. We work with more than 550 schools and thousands of school leaders, covering 250,000 children.

We would like to focus on:

1. What we know from our network of school and trust leaders about the impact of Covid-19 on disadvantaged and vulnerable learners
2. The value of school collaboration and challenge to combine our wisdom, so support for pupils is the best it can be when leaders are innovating at speed
3. Evidence from successful support projects to close the disadvantage gap, which can inform future planning
4. Importance of peer review during a period of flux where regular accountability measures can't function - and to help rapidly identify and mobilise evidence of what is working.

Schools in our networks have stressed the need to act with urgency to address the widening disadvantage gap, which has been exacerbated by school closures.

Disadvantaged and vulnerable learners are far less likely to engage with remote learning, despite schools doing all they can to call parents, develop paper and online learning programmes, and try to bring children into school where necessary and appropriate.

We believe that now more than ever schools need to collaborate to pool and create knowledge, particularly around what works well in recovery for vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils (including those who find themselves newly in this group). But they also need the sensitive and developmental challenge of their peers, through peer review, to extend their thinking and plans for what is possible.

1. Impact particularly on disadvantaged and vulnerable learners

1.1 In the past few months we have seen many school and trust leaders innovate and collaborate at impressive speed to protect and educate the children they serve.

1.2 Cassie Buchanan, Headteacher of Charles Dickens Research School and new CEO of The Charter Schools Educational Trust, had a virtual school for Charles Dickens up and running as soon as schools closed. She said they knew from existing school communications that most parents accessed things on mobile phones so made everything mobile-friendly. Wellbeing has become increasingly important so they have added more wellbeing resources for students to access at home. They track responses to emails and work submitted, and if they have not heard from some families at all they know and follow-up: phoning families to check things are OK and encourage them to engage with online learning.

1.3 Secondary school staff also have been spending hours on the phone trying to manage challenging situations and support disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. Many are sharing resources with other schools through our network and beyond.

1.4 In special schools, initially schools and trusts identified the most vulnerable in safeguarding terms and worked with the LA to prioritise transport and encourage parents to get those children into school. Some special school leaders had to ask a few children not to attend because they were too risky to have in (not just PMLD but also, for example, some children whose challenging behaviour involves spitting at people). They had trouble sourcing PPE. By late April, heads and CEOs were coping with growing requests from parents for children to come into schools. "Families are starting to crack up," one told us. They were also looking ahead to consider how they could help graduating pupils transition to new schools and FE settings, as vulnerable children often need additional transition support to ensure they can settle in.

1.5 As schools and trusts have rapidly shifted to remote learning, we have helped share evidence of what works and have found that, now more than ever, schools value collaboration as they adapt and take critical decisions. These have included:

- Providing ipads and laptops for poorer pupils
- Providing food for families in a variety of ways (esp before the national voucher scheme was fully functioning) because they are concerned some will not have enough to eat
- Creating and ensuring take-up of online learning programmes

1.6 These demonstrate the important role of schools in communities, combining social care and childcare with their primary role of educating children.

1.7 Inevitably as the Government prioritised our emergency medical response, schools and trusts turned to each other for guidance and support. We've brought together groups of school leaders regularly to discuss what they are doing, share advice and effective practice.

1.8 Special schools tell us they are not confident their specific needs are to the fore at Government level, with specific guidance for special and AP settings lagging behind that for mainstream schools or lacking. They welcomed the clarification that school leaders could make decisions about how best to meet pupils' needs, whether by having them in school or supporting their individual learning and care needs at home. They are keen that a similar approach will be followed as schools reopen, as a blanket year group by year group approach would be inappropriate because of the need to take account of specific and varying individual needs.

1.9 Secondary school leaders are worried about disadvantaged learners who have slipped further behind. On the other hand the massive improvements in the use of technology means there are virtual resources that have been created - audio powerpoints, recorded lessons for revision - which can provide a significant amount of help for those students.

1.10 There are concerns that too little attention has been given to some qualifications, too. One said they had been told they could just give students a Level 1 (NVQ) if they had not completed Level 2 work, even though the student might have been working towards Level 2 for ages and have completed most of the work.

2. **Value of schools and trusts working together**

2.1 Schools and trusts are preparing for a phased return of schools but mindful of staff concerns about at risk groups, how well children will manage social distancing, lack of PPE and more general anxieties including how to get to work safely in cities. Primary schools are preparing for school reopening, communicating risk minimisation measures to parents and staff, including enhanced hand washing, removal of soft toys, visible markings across the school to support social distancing, and staggered school drop-off and start times. Sharing with each other how they plan to tackle these areas has helped.

2.2 In our online meetings and webinars people have been able to find out how others are tackling these critical issues and share evidence of what works in remote and online learning. It has saved everyone expending energy inventing the same wheels. We hosted a very well received webinar for schools by Marc Rowland, author and Advisor for Improving Outcomes for Disadvantaged Learners for the Unity Schools Partnerships and Chair of our Excellence for Everyone advisory board, and another session with the Behavioural Insights Team who shared with school leaders some effective ways to improve digital engagement with parents and children.

2.3 Schools have also found it really helpful to share what they have put together to help children, and staff, with bereavement; resources to help them support children's mental health; updated staff safety policies and processes; and CPD resources. Many of these are sensitive or difficult issues so sharing what works to help ensure children (and staff) are supported at their time of greatest need has been really valuable.

2.4 Most school leaders are focusing on recovery in the medium and longer-term, where they can, because they recognise the need to enable the emotional, social and academic recovery (in that order) of disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils in particular.

3. **What works to help close the widening disadvantage gap**

3.1 All school and trust leaders recognise that this widening disadvantage gap will not be solved overnight and will need sustained effort to address it.

3.2 We have worked to close the disadvantage gap in some of most deprived areas across the country, and have evidence that shows what works to tackle this endemic problem is not initiatives promising easy answers, but programmes which can flex to address local challenges and bring best practice from across the sector. Our existing schools network, experience of identifying and sharing effective practice, and focus on evaluation, helps us understand how schools can make the biggest difference for children. We have developed solid evidence of what works - and have suggestions for the future based on this experience.

3.3 Drawing on published (from the EEF and others) and practitioner evidence we have identified what pupils need to succeed against the odds. This forms the basis of our programme for disadvantaged students, Excellence for Everyone, and our recent school improvement work in Knowsley on improving levels of literacy in primary and secondary schools.

3.4 The latter was a successful project in an exceptionally disadvantaged area, and was recently evaluated by Manchester Metropolitan University. They found that deploying experienced headteachers/CEOs to advise and coach Knowsley school leaders led to an extremely positive impact on classroom practice, outcomes and teacher development.

3.5 The programme ran across 29 primary and secondary schools, between February 2018 and July 2019, and was based on a collaborative learning model with advisers working alongside participating schools. The advisers were credible practitioners, a mixture of serving headteachers/CEOs, Ofsted inspectors and former HMIs, many drawn from the Challenge Partners network. The disciplined approach to school improvement also involved audit, joint planning and mapping alongside current provision, followed by review, reflection and evaluation of impact. In each school, governors were part of groups set up to monitor the impact.

3.6 The most effective advisers were able to flex between adopting a consultant role, providing resources, brokering external support and offering guidance and advice, alongside mentoring and acting as a coach to ensure ownership. It is important to note that this was not a blanket strategy, but

an example of bespoke support and a range of curriculum, assessment and literacy schemes were introduced across the schools.

3.7 The Manchester Metropolitan University evaluation of the project is extremely positive about the accelerated improvement in schools, in an area with very high levels of disadvantage. It is not a cheap model in the short-term but the long-term benefits are significant, making it far more sustainable than any 'quick fix'. Senior and middle leadership capacity has been strengthened through the project and a momentum has been created because progress is strong in the majority of schools. Baseline data is used more effectively and schools are setting higher expectations. This trend is evidenced by their improved SATs scores and English GCSE results in 2019.

3.8 Another benefit from this whole school approach is that it also supports the children identified by Javed Khan, Chief Executive of Barnardo's (in his evidence to the Education Committee previously) who are currently not recognised as vulnerable but will need support when they come back to school.

3.9 The pandemic will put many more families under strain and mean more children become vulnerable than those currently identified. Facilitating targeted pupil support alongside whole school improvement, informed by nationwide knowledge exchange to share excellent practice, offers the greatest potential to ensure all children get the help they need.

4. Importance of peer review and challenge for future planning

4.1 We know that disruption to schooling is possible over the next year and believe contingency planning needs to focus on helping schools to work together to tackle these difficult new and systemic issues. Our school leaders wanted to get together to discuss what they are doing, what works, and challenge each other's thinking. That's crucial when we look to recover too.

4.2 Challenge Partners believe that peer review should be the norm not the exception, especially during a period of flux where regular accountability measures can't (and shouldn't) function in the usual way.

4.3 This will be important to provide individual schools with the challenge and support needed through an extended recovery phase, and as a way of rapidly identifying and mobilising evidence of what is working.

4.4 Peer review is a better vehicle for this than inspection, not least because it can be backed up by peer support and rapid sharing of identified excellence. This would ensure schools get the supportive challenge they need to do the best for their pupils, especially disadvantaged, leaving Ofsted to focus on critical issues like safeguarding.

4.5 We have the evidence base to know that when schools work in partnership to improve, pupils receive a better educational experience. Challenge Partners grew out of the London Challenge which helped schools work together to share excellent practice. That led to London pulling away from the rest of the country both in terms of narrowing the attainment gap between its advantaged and disadvantaged young people, and in being home to most of the social mobility hotspots identified by the Social Mobility Commission.

4.6 For the past nine years Challenge Partners has been successfully running large scale practitioner-led programmes, supporting schools to develop and engage with research so they are constantly redefining what outstanding practice looks like. We have conducted over 2,000 Quality Assurance Reviews (peer reviews), with a section specifically focused on tackling disadvantage.

4.7 The Institute of Education (University College London) <u>evaluated our peer reviews</u> and found they offer schools 'multiple gains'. Value is also added at trust-level by our Trust Peer Review, identified by an <u>NFER evaluation</u>.

4.8 Peer reviews provide robust, developmental challenge on schools' strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunity for rich professional dialogue as they are done with - not to - the school being reviewed. Reviewers gain professional development and the chance to take ideas back to their own schools. Quality Assurance Reviews also provide the opportunity to identify and evaluate Areas of Excellence and learning from these is shared across the country through Leadership Development sessions (now being held virtually). Excellent practice is shared in a way which enables school leaders to examine and ask questions to understand how they could adapt it for their own settings.

4.9 As a charity we enable outstanding practitioners across the country to reach a larger network and have an increased impact. The capacity lies within schools and we have headteachers and trust CEOs who are able to reconcile the interests of their own schools with the moral imperative to 'own the problem' and work alongside other schools to find solutions to the challenges they are facing.

4.10 The support offered by schools to other schools should also be recognised, valued and reported. These 'leading' schools do far more than focus on 'standing out' themselves, and recognising their expertise in leading systemic change could help drive improvement across the whole sector. That is more important than ever, as we tackle the complex endemic issues exacerbated by Covid-19.

4.11 Including school-to-school collaboration and peer review in contingency planning is the best way to ensure school and trust leaders can identify and share the most effective practice, whether in online engagement of pupils or catch-up support for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable learners.

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