

Education Committee
The Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Services
13 January 2021

Witnesses

- Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson MP, Secretary of State Department for Education
- Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education

Overview

The Education Committee heard evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on education. MPs discussed a wide range of issues, including access to digital devices, school closures, attendance levels and the recent problems pertaining to children's free school meals.

Children's Food Parcels

The session was opened the Chair, Robert Halfon MP (Con, Harlow) who asked for an update regarding the children's food parcels issue.

Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson MP, Secretary of State Department for Education, responded that he was disgusted with the picture of the food box that had been circulating and told the committee that it was completely unacceptable. There were clear standards set by the department, he continued, against which Chartwells had to deliver.

Williamson further stated that the department would name and shame any company not delivering against the standards and that they would support any school that needed to take action. Chartwells had accepted that the situation was not good enough and had apologised, he added.

Asked by the Chair whether a national voucher scheme was due to be introduced, Williamson said that schools had existing food contracts in place to provide food boxes, while they could also take on local voucher schemes which would be reimbursed through the department. Moreover, he added, the national voucher scheme would be launched in a weeks' time.

Mental Health

Was the DfE conducting any audit of the impact of the pandemic and school closures on pupils' mental health, the Chair questioned.

Williamson replied that he recognised that the pandemic had put an extraordinary strain on young people and families. He then noted that the Department for Health had invested two-point-three billion pounds in mental health, while the Wellbeing for Education Return programme had invested in training for teachers and staff to support pupils with their mental health.

Moreover, Williamson continued, the Minister for Children and the Minister for Universities had been instructed to establish a taskforce to assess how the Government could best respond to mental health issues within education.

Who was consulted with in the development of the new free school meals guidance, Apsana Begum MP (Lab, Poplar and Limehouse) inquired, as the guidance appeared to be unclear, to which Williamson responded that the guidance had been designed to give schools flexibility between the

national and local schemes. By providing the maximum amount of options the best solutions for each school could be found, he added.

Asked by Begum how standards were being enforced, Williamson told the committee that the standards were clear and there was no space to tolerate sub-standard meals that did not include the right nutritional value for children.

Standards would be enforced and there would be consequences for those companies that do not meet the standards, Williamson reiterated.

Truancy and Attendance Rates

The Chair noted that absentee rates had been increasing before the pandemic and had increased further during the lockdown, while wrap around access to social services and referrals to social services had also declined. He subsequently asked what was the department's plan to re-engage learners falling off the radar and support multi-agency work at the local level.

Williamson responded that one of the positive outcomes of the pandemic had been the emergence of closer working between schools, local authorities and the police to support vulnerable pupils and address dis-engagement. Initial data produced in the previous week had shown an increase of pupils with social workers attending school, he added, and though the numbers were still too low, the department had a strategy to bring the numbers up over the long term.

The Chair then questioned whether the Government had softened the requirement for local authorities to support EHCP plans as was the case in the first lockdown to which Williamson responded that there were no plans to soften the requirements for EHCP plans. He added that AP would also remain open.

Had there been any assessment of truancy rates, Ian Mearns MP (Lab, Gateshead), compared to absentee rates (with parental approval).

Williamson responded that the only way to reduce truancy and absentee rates was through coordinated efforts between the department, police, schools and the local authorities. The department was currently working with local authorities to provide absentee data, he continued, so that they had the information available to address the issue. That data for the autumn term would be published 19th January, Williamson added.

School Openings & Closures

David Johnston MP (Con, Wantage) asked why the decision was taken to move away from the previous system of school openings on the basis of a rota.

Williamson answered that the decision was taken with Public Health England, the Department of Health and the COVID-O committee. The reason, he continued, was that the contingency framework met the needs of schools best.

The Chair questioned the marginal effects of school closures on the rate of transmissions to which Williamson responded that it remained the priority to keep schools open. However, the decision was taken as a measure to reduce movement across the whole community when transmission rates became unmanageably high.

On the issue of attendance data, Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education, told the committee that overall fourteen percent of the overall cohort attended schools on Monday. She added that the number of people moving as a result of school closures had declined by eighty-five percent, which had a significant impact on transmission rates.

Disadvantage Gap

What was the department's estimate of the impact of the pandemic on the disadvantage gap, Johnston questioned.

Addressing the attainment gap was one of the most significant challenges the Government would face in the coming years, Williamson answered. Every action had to be taken to address any exacerbation of the gap, he said, adding that one of the most important measures would be to re-open schools again.

Testing

Christian Wakeford MP (Con, Bury South) asked why the decision to introduce mass testing in secondary schools was taken when it was and why was the announcement not brought forward.

Williamson answered that the situation was moving forward with incredible speed and that it was only at the stage of the announcement had the ability to offer the opportunity for schools to undertake mass testing. However, he recognised that the timing was not ideal.

Williamson then told MPs that mass testing in secondary schools had been rolled out in a number of areas, most notably in Liverpool, after which the department had arranged a number of pilots to test the feasibility and utility of rolling out mass testing across the UK. It was only after those pilots, was the department able to offer mass testing, which was why the announcement did not come earlier, he explained.

Would mass testing be extended to non-secondary schools the Chair inquired, to which Williamson responded that the offer had already been extended to further education and sixth form colleagues. Moreover, he said, mass testing of staff would be extended to primary schools next week. The ambition, he added, was to roll it out to all pupils in the UK.

What plans were being developed to ensure that all young pupils in schools could be tested, Caroline Johnson MP (Con, Sleaford and North Hykeham) subsequently inquired.

It was not right or appropriate to ask school staff to conduct testing of pupils in primary schools, Williamson answered, and as such the department was considering a system whereby tests were carried out by parents in the home.

Guidance and Standards

Tom Hunt MP (Con, Ipswich) asked for further information regarding how Ofsted were to monitor and evaluate the success of schools balancing online learning with classroom learning.

Williamson responded that there had been a significant shift in the educational offer provided by schools, since March last year, with many schools setting high standards for effective learning during the pandemic. The department had set out expectations for remote education last year, he continued,

as it was recognised that schools could be closed again in the future. That had been the right thing, he argued.

If there were issues with a school, or a parent had concerns, the parent should engage directly with the teachers, Williamson told the committee then headteachers if those conversations were unsatisfactory. Nonetheless, there had to be a last port of call for recourse, he said, of which Ofsted was the most appropriate option.

Was the provision within the DfE's guidance that pupils unable to access remote learning should be considered vulnerable and allowed to attend schools being followed in practice, Hunt then questioned, before asking how the pandemic might have impacted teacher recruitment and retention.

In relation to the allocation of vulnerable pupils, Williamson answered, the data indicated that there were roughly fourteen percent of pupils in attendance, which did not suggest abnormal rates of additionally categorised vulnerable children.

Williamson then advised the committee that the pandemic had appeared to drive up teacher recruitment numbers.

What internal checks did the department have to verify and ensure the accuracy of guidance and information provided to the sector, the Chair followed up, to which Acland-Hood replied that she recognised that where there were errors, it caused considerable difficulty and stress for teachers and staff.

She then informed the committee that there was a single, central guidance team to ensure coherence, as well as a triple lock for reviewing and clearing guidance to ensure clarity and accuracy. Those processes ensured that guidance was aligned to other parts of Whitehall, she added.

School Budgets

Would the Government be taking into account the additional costs on schools of operating during the pandemic, Hunt queried, to which Williamson replied that during the first national lockdown a package of measures were introduced to support schools, with over thirteen-thousand schools currently having receiving reimbursements. A further package of support had been introduced for the autumn period, he continued, and another packaged was being considered moving forward.

Connectivity & Digital Access

Kim Johnson MP (Lab, Liverpool, Riverside) asked what data the department held on the number of disadvantaged children who did not have access to a laptop and whether the Government would consider introducing free WiFi to all families in receipt of Universal Credit.

Williamson responded that access to the internet was essential and that was why the Government were investing in digital devices. By the end of the week there will have been over three quarters of a million devices rolled out to schools, he said.

The department had trialled a number of approaches to provide free access, Williamson continued, and concluded that the most beneficial route was to work with mobile data providers to increase the limits of data provision.

Would the Government consider introducing a new dedicated technology budget for schools to help them tackle the digital divide in their local communities, K. Johnson questioned, to which Williamson responded that the Government was committed to reducing the digital divide and supporting children's access to online and virtual learning. However, Williamson refused to comment on the specific policy suggestion.

Was there a dedicated helpline for schools who were not receiving the digital device allocation they needed, the Chair then questioned, to which Williamson answered that maintained schools should contact the local authority and academies their trusts. However, there was a dedicated email address for schools to contact, he said.

What was the updated figure of the number of children that still did not have access to a digital device at home, the Chair asked, however Acland-Hood replied that that data was not collected.

Catch-Up Funding

K. Johnson asked whether further funding beyond the one billion pounds already announced would be provided for catch-up services and whether there had been any lessons learned from the money provided so far.

Williamson replied that the department was monitoring closely the progress and developments attained through the catch-up funding. The evidence so far, he advised MPs, pointed to a significant impact that funding had had, on vulnerable but also all other students.

Teacher Training

C. Johnson asked whether there had been any updates to teacher training programmes that included skills for teaching online, to which Williamson said that the department was not considering altering the teacher training framework at present. However, extra levels of support for newly qualified teachers as part of the early career framework was being considered, he said.

Acland-Hood added that the department had delivered a one-stop-shop through the Get Help With Remote Education, including webinars and guidance to support effective curriculum delivery.

Assessments

Asked about school assessments for private candidates, Williamson told the committee that there had to be an accessible route for all private candidates to be assessed and receive a grade. A consultation was underway after which the options would be set out for them to receive an awarded grade alongside all other pupils in the system.

Williamson further told the committee that final assessments of grading had to be made at the tail end of the academic year to maximise the amount pupils were learning and prevent issues of morale and motivation associated with poor assessments.

C. Johnson questioned whether the department was considering the mechanism of narrative verdicts to which Williamson said they were not.

Fleur Anderson MP (Lab, Putney) asked why the consultations on examinations were not held last summer when it was evident that not having exams was a possible contingency for 2021. She further

noted that ninety-two percent of teachers surveyed had lost faith in the Secretary of State, and asked what could be done to regain their trust.

Williamson answered that the department had been working very closely with the sector to develop a range of contingency measures in the instance that exams could not be proceeded with. However, those measures differed subject to when they had to be deployed, he said, and so it was never the case that a specific contingency could be designed.

Early Years Provision

Anderson asked whether the Secretary of State would review the decision to link funding to attendance currently rather than last year for the early years sector.

Williamson responded that the Spring funding decision had been announced before the lockdown when attendance was increasing again. However, he recognised that attendance was declining again and as such the department would be reviewing the data. Moreover, he said, other approaches for supporting the early years sector were being explored.

Williamson added that the decision to keep early years provision open was the right one given the impact on children's development of closing that provision.