

## Education Committee

### Left Behind White Pupils from Disadvantaged Backgrounds

26 January 2021

#### Witnesses

- Sonia Shaljean, Managing Director, Lads Need Dads
- Merle Davies, Director, Blackpool Centre for Early Child Development
- Claire Smith, Talk Halton Project Lead, Halton Borough Council
- Lousia Reeves, Head of Impact and Evidence, I CAN
- Dr Javed Khan, Chief Executive Officer, Barnardo's

#### Overview

The Education Committee discussed the challenges facing white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds with third and public sector experts. The committee also heard evidence on the impact of school closures on all children and scrutinised the efficacy of current early years provision.

#### School Closures

The session was opened the Chair, Robert Halfon MP (Con, Harlow) who asked what impact school closures during the pandemic was likely to have, particularly upon pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Dr Javed Khan, Chief Executive Officer, Barnardo's, answered that the impact was significant. School closures had a dramatic effect on children's self-esteem, mental health and wellbeing, he explained, as well as significant impacts upon parents. That had been exacerbated by the situation faced by support services, which were becoming increasingly stretched as demand increased and resources depleted, Khan added.

Sonia Shaljean, Managing Director, Lads Need Dads concurred, adding that particularly for boys, remote learning had been a disadvantage, with virtual models not being conducive to boys' learning.

Merle Davies, Director, Blackpool Centre for Early Child Development, argued that deprivation was the largest concern as there were many poorer families that did not have the skills or resources to home school their children. As such, already disadvantaged children were becoming more disadvantaged, she argued.

Claire Smith, Talk Halton Project Lead, Halton Borough Council, said that school closures were also having a big impact on children's language and communication skills. Face-to-face socialising and peer-to-peer interaction was essential for young children in particular, Claire Smith, Talk Halton Project Lead, Halton Borough Council added, and as such school closures were having an impact on that development.

Khan then called for a clear plan for schools to reopen as soon as possible, including prioritising teachers for vaccination, robust testing schemes and additional support for schools to provide further mental health resources.

## **Disadvantaged White Pupils**

Apsana Begum MP (Lab, Poplar and Limehouse) asked whether there had been a differential disadvantage for disadvantaged white pupils compared to those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Shaljean answered that eighty-nine percent of those boys were from white disadvantaged backgrounds, she added, though she noted that only applied to the coastal region of Essex.

Lousia Reeves, Head of Impact and Evidence, I CAN, stated that there was an impact across ethnic groups. However, the attainment gap, between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged families, she said particularly in relation to language skills, was growing considerably as a result of school closures.

Smith then advised the committee that it was difficult to answer the question as the areas that the charities worked in were monocultural and therefore they did not have the appropriate data. The problem, Smith continued, often related to deprivation and to culture, with many families unaware or unable to talk and read to their children and encourage their development.

What could be done to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged white pupils, Begum queried, to which Smith replied that children's communication underpinned their entire development throughout school. As such, she called for early years intervention to provide recovery programmes and communication catch up programmes.

Davies concurred and advocated additional teaching for early years to bring them up to speed. However, she also called for a better qualified workforce so that children with deprived backgrounds had the best workforce teaching them.

Caroline Johnson MP (Con, Sleaford and North Hykeham) asked how white disadvantaged pupils could be identified and targeted for support, to which Shaljean responded that a flagging system should be introduced into all schools across the country.

## **Ethnicity**

What was the main cause behind the attainment gap between disadvantaged white pupils and their peers, Tom Hunt MP (Con, Ipswich), then questioned, to which Khan answered that there were many reasons that disadvantaged white pupils did poorly at school which did not relate directly to ethnicity. For example, he said, poverty, intergenerational disadvantage and lack of local opportunities.

Geography and funding were more important factors, Khan argued, noting that disadvantaged pupils of all groups did better in London than those in the North West of England.

Davies agreed, noting that the financial stability of the early years sector in particular was a significant problem, even prior to the pandemic, as funding in the north had been cut dramatically. Shaljean argued however, that fatherlessness was a much larger factor than ethnicity.

David Johnston MP (Con, Wantage) followed up by expressing concern that Barnardo's had information on their website regarding white privilege and suggested that such a concept could be detrimental to the attainment of both white and BAME children.

Khan retorted that Barnardo's had engaged with the Charity Commission on that matter who found that by helping families understand the concept of white privilege Barnardo's had behaved within its objectives. He noted that the majority of children supported by Barnardo's in its one-hundred and

fifty-year history had been deprived white children. He then argued that in addressing white privilege, Barnardo's was providing information on an important contemporary issue.

Khan then stated that while there were a range of disadvantages affecting children, all the data indicated that BAME children faced a further disadvantage in society due to the colour of their skin.

Kim Johnson MP (Lab, Liverpool, Riverside) asked whether there was a relationship between ethnicity, educational attainment and fatherlessness, to which Shaljean replied that fatherlessness was a significant factor in poor educational attainment, irrespective of ethnicity. She noted that in her area most fatherless families were white, however that was likely to be different in other areas such as London.

### **Early Years Provision**

Fleur Anderson MP (Lab, Putney) asked what interventions mattered the most in early years provision.

Smith responded that the biggest difference could be made when multiple services came together with early years providers. As such, she argued the most important interventions were those reviewed commissioning and considered how various services, including health, social care and education could coordinate for the early years. Moreover, she said, early years practitioners had to be appropriately trained and funded.

Shaljean then advised the committee that reading and writing were key skills for all children and impacted upon educational attainment in all areas. Boys were particularly likely to have poor reading and writing skills, she continued, which needed to be addressed. Moreover, there were too few male teachers in early years provision, which had to be addressed to ensure positive male role models in young boys' lives.

Family hubs were also particularly valuable, Khan told the committee, particularly when they were easily accessible, without stigma, and worked closely through a whole-family approach with other services such as the police, NHS, local charities and the local authority. Khan then agreed to write to the committee with details of the impact family hubs had.

Reeves added that the workforce in early years had to be upskilled to provide better support in the areas of language and communication.

Anderson then questioned whether there needed to be any changes to the early years pupil premium to which Davies replied that additional ring-fenced funding for three-year-olds impacted by the pandemic would be highly beneficial.

Gullis then questioned why so few low-income families were not taking up the full free fifteen hours of early years provision offered by the Government, to which Davies replied that it was important to have an informed, peer lead workforce within communities to encourage engagement with services and provision on offer. Many families were sceptical and did not understand the type of support available or how to access it.

Khan concurred, adding that with years of austerity local services have been decimated. As such, inter-dependent strategic partnerships between statutory providers, charities and communities was needed in order to increase engagement and participation.

## **Holistic Services & Alternative Provision**

Gullis asked for examples of best practice in relation to holistic service design or alternative provisions, particularly in early years.

Khan replied that family hubs had been a tremendous success and as such the family hub model was one that should be emulated. Family hubs were successful, he said, because they offered a joined-up holistic service that involved parents and communities. In relation to alternative provision, Khan stated that it should be a last resort and that it was vital for wrap around support to be developed for schools at all levels.

David Simmonds MP (Con, Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) then questioned whether the current system in which local authorities contracted out services to the third sector was efficient and provided for suitable strategic oversight.

Khan replied that a systemic review of the entire approach was needed as the current system was no longer sustainable. There were problems with oversight, he said, but also in relation to the identification of needs and subsequent design and implementation of services. Local strategic partnerships had to be established in which organisations such as Barnardo's were able to co-produce the solution with commissioners, Khan argued. That system was being used by Essex County Council, he added, with great success.

Davies concurred, adding that the reintroduction of community development workers could also be highly beneficial.

## **Further & Higher Education**

What solutions were there to address the fact that white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were the least likely to attend university, Gullis inquired.

Khan responded that it was important not to over-emphasise the importance of university, compared with other further education pathways. The issue was one of hope, he argued, as long-term underinvestment had led to depleted services and consequently poor performance. Hope had to be returned to disadvantaged families, he said, otherwise they were inevitably going to continue to underperform.