

## Covid-19: Impact on Education

[Mr Laurence Robertson in the Chair]

18:15:00

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair)

I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will also be suspensions between each debate. I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall, and they are expected to remain for the entire debate. I must also remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times, both to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room.

18:16:00

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con)

I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 564696, 548778, 573621 and 564209, relating to the impact of covid-19 on education.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. The first petition is to do with cancelling GCSEs and A-levels in 2021 and replacing them with coursework and teacher assessment, and was created on 29 December; the second is about allowing teacher-predicted grades for BTEC students; the third is about keeping schools closed until May; and the fourth is about closing schools in all tier 4 areas.

Clearly, over the last four or five months, the situation has been incredibly fluid, so for some of those petitions—two in particular—circumstances and events have moved ahead of them slightly. However, I do think this a valuable opportunity to have a discussion about the impact of covid-19 on our children's education in a more general sense. We could not get a much broader debate, and I imagine that colleagues and I will find it very difficult to keep our points concise, because this is such a multifaceted issue, and our children have been impacted in so many different ways by covid-19, but I will attempt to do so. I will just cover four or five key lessons that I think we need to take away and some of the thoughts that I have.

My first point is to do with the danger of making generalisations and assumptions about how a child may or may not have found schools being closed, particularly based on, say, the socioeconomic background that they may come from. There is some evidence, produced by the Sutton Trust, that suggests that children from more deprived backgrounds have been particularly badly impacted by the closure of schools compared with children from other areas, but we should not necessarily assume that, and we should not assume that a child in a different situation found it any easier. I have spoken to a number of families whose children have come from a variety of backgrounds and who, for whatever reason, have found it particularly difficult, and their mental health has been particularly impacted. In coming to those sorts of generalisations, we should

not lose those individuals' stories, because, in some senses, no one child's experience of the past year has been the same. We need a response that, as far as possible, caters for that individual child. That is the first point I wanted to make.

Secondly, on mental health, research published by MIND showed that 73% of those at school feel as though their mental health has deteriorated over the past year. There is a massive challenge in front of the Government; there is a massive challenge in front of schools; and there is a massive challenge in front of young people, to try to make up for some of the learning loss that has clearly happened over the last year. Another point that I would make is that I think we should be careful in the language that we use. There is a big challenge in front of us, but we should be aware that the anxiety that many young people feel at the moment is already very significant. Sometimes the words that I see in the media, such as "lost generation" and so on, can fuel those anxieties to an even greater extent. Yes, there is a significant challenge in front of us, but we can overcome it, so in a sense, we need a degree of positivity and a can-do spirit. My concern is that a daunting situation may become even more daunting if we are not careful about the language that we use.

The Minister will be aware from my position on the Education Committee that I speak very frequently about special educational needs. The national special educational needs and disabilities review has been delayed, but if there can be an advantage from that delay, it is that it allows us to properly look at the way in which the pandemic has had a different impact on different children, including those with special educational needs.

That must include not only those with education, health and care plans, but those who might not have one of those plans but still have learning disabilities. Dyslexic and dyspraxic pupils would be two examples. They have not been eligible to come into school most recently, and some of those individuals have struggled with online learning because of the unique way in which many of them learn. Not having that personal engagement has often made it much more difficult for them to learn and some, I fear, have fallen behind more as a result.

When we talk about those with perhaps more complex and significant needs and disabilities, something else that we need to bear in mind is their mental state, and how they often struggle with transitions. The movement from working online to back into school, to online and then back into school again can have a profound impact on their mental state. Many of them have been eligible to keep on coming into school, but many have not, and there has often been good reason for that. A therapeutic approach to help them with the transition from what might seem like quite an unsettling period for them is also very important.

I am encouraged by what I have heard about the tutoring programme, and how, when we think about the ways in which our young people can catch up from any learning loss, there have been some SEND specialists feeding into that. That was encouraging, but it would be brilliant if I could hear more today about how that is working in practice.

My next point is to do with exams. One of the petitions called for a cancellation of exams. Bearing in mind the circumstances, I do not think that there was any alternative. It was the right decision to cancel those exams, but I also believe that it was a regrettable decision. I think we were left with no choice, but it comes with its own negatives. I believe that exams should be here

to stay. I do not think that this should be used as an opportunity to question the role of exams in the medium to long term. I believe that they continue to be the fairest way, often, of assessing pupils.

We should also think about those young people who actually quite like exams, and find that exams work for them. A lot of those children have learning disabilities. I talk as somebody who has dyspraxia and dyslexia. When I was a 12-year-old, I had the reading and writing age of an eight-year-old. I ended up catching up, and did have my struggles at school, but I actually used to quite like exams because I was an unconventional learner. I did not do well in the classroom. I did not go at the same pace as everybody else. That revision gave me time to consolidate my knowledge and surprise in my exams. I really would not have wanted to have been at school over the last year, so we should think about how those children could feel as though their chance to flourish has been taken away.

On the teacher assessment that we will have this year, some schools will have these tests that will feed into the overall assessment, but these tests are not mandatory. Perhaps they should have been mandatory. Having spoken to the Minister about this before, my understanding is that the teachers at a school will have a degree of flexibility over this, and the approach will not necessarily have to be the same for all children. It might be that some children in a school can take a test while others do not.

I would also like to think that pupils could feed into the process. If they felt that having a test would mean that their teachers were in a better place to make an accurate assessment about their progress, I think their views should be taken into account. I go back to the point that I made about dyslexic pupils. I have spoken to two headteachers at dyslexic schools, where all the pupils are dyslexic, and it is interesting that both of those schools have taken a decision to have tests for all pupils. That is useful in providing a sense as to how it may be that all those children could be negatively impacted by this.

Another point I would like to make is about children who have English as a second language. I know that in my own constituency, there are many pupils who come under that bracket. I have spoken to headteachers in my constituency who are concerned that the level of participation in some of the online learning has been lower in those communities, and also that pupils' English has actually gone backwards throughout the time that schools have been closed. When we are thinking about catch-up, that aspect needs to be there also.

I was encouraged by a meeting that the Education Committee had recently with the catch-up commissioner. I have had a number of conversations with headteachers in my constituency recently who have said that when we are thinking about catch-up, flexibility needs to be at the heart of it, and that teachers and headteachers, who know their children better than anybody else, should be able to take decisions that they believe to be in the best interests of each individual child. The catch-up commissioner made it very clear that that will be the case.

There are lots of things that we will have to work out, particularly with catch-up schools over the summer, such as how they will interrelate with the holiday food and activity programmes, and how that will work. It is about having that flexibility with catch-up, so that teachers and headteachers can make those decisions. That goes back to what I said earlier: we should not make assumptions about how each child has found lockdown. There is an element of truth in the idea that clearly some home environments are more conducive to online learning

than other environments. There is a reality there. Some children do not have their own bedroom or a quiet place to work, and they might have parents who want to help with their learning but, frankly, cannot help as much as they would like to. Some children have a different background and have their own space and parents who are able to help them, but we should not assume that. Sometimes parents might be able to help but cannot, because they are working round the clock. We do not know what their circumstances will be.

In a nutshell, and in summary, my key points are these. First, we should not generalise or make assumptions and, as far as possible, we should approach each individual young person and try to cater to their needs. My second point, unsurprisingly, is about children with special educational needs and the different ways in which this has impacted them. As I said, it is so important that we get SEND right. It is right morally, it is right for them, and it is also necessary for our country, because we do not want to lose their talents. This pandemic has in some ways made the situation harder for them. We should also think about those children who the way we have been assessing has perhaps worked against; they have been losers in that.

When we are thinking about how covid has impacted our young people, we need to be sensitive in the language that we use and conscious of the way in which their learning, but also their mental health, has suffered. It will be difficult to catch up, but they are our children, and we will do whatever it takes to support them, so there needs to be a degree of positivity there as well.

18:28:00

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I really value the opportunity to contribute on all the issues raised by these petitions, and also the wider issues for our education sector as a result of covid-19.

I start by paying tribute to all the teaching staff, school staff, parents and especially children attending schools across my constituency in Kingston and Richmond for the successful way that they all returned to school last week. I was speaking just this morning to the head of the education service for both boroughs, and he was telling me that it has all gone extremely smoothly. I have also had an opportunity to speak to teachers from all sorts of schools across the constituency. The testing in our secondary schools has gone very well. Most children –my own included–are absolutely thrilled to be back at school and back with their friends. It has all gone extremely well, and I pay huge tribute to staff, parents and children across the constituency. I also want to say a huge thank you to all the parents who have been home schooling over the past few incredibly difficult months. They have done a wonderful job and can all pat themselves on the back, having successfully delivered their children back to school, which is where we all want them to be.

I would like to start by asking the Minister for clarity on the use of face masks in secondary school. In particular, what does the science say about their benefits for reducing transmission versus the disadvantages they create for communication? I was very lucky to have a Zoom chat last Wednesday with some year 11 students at Christ's School in Richmond. It was wonderful to see them in their classroom but strange to see them wearing face masks. I would appreciate clarity from the Department for Education about the value of wearing face masks.

I also want to ask about exams, which the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt)

raised, with a great deal of interesting insight based on his own experience. There is still a great deal of uncertainty about how qualifications are going to be awarded this year. I am very concerned that the lack of standardisation across exam centres will negatively affect some students who may well have achieved better results if they had been able to sit their exams. I would welcome more clarification on that. It is a pity that it has taken until now for any kind of guidance to be issued, given that the probable need to cancel exams was identified some time ago.

The schools I have spoken to are very concerned about the appeals process and the extent to which it is going to create an additional burden for them. I have no doubt that many parents and students will want to appeal the mark they are given, and I am very concerned that that will create a big burden for schools at the end of August, just as they are preparing for the new school year. I would welcome further guidance from the DFE about how it plans to address that particular topic.

The biggest issue faced by most schools in my area is that of funding. Covid has increased massively the pressure on school budgets. Obviously, there are increased costs due to all the covid-secure measures our schools have had to take, both now and in September, in order to welcome children back. Many of them are reporting a hit to their income as a result of being unable to hire out their facilities or host sports clubs, for example. School budgets have not increased to meet costs and they are not being compensated for any additional expense. That is a real worry for some of them. Other hits to their income include the unavailability of grants that they would usually get. In addition, local authorities have not been given guidance or clarity on the extent to which they can use funds to assist schools in financial difficulty.

I will end by echoing a point made by the hon. Member for Ipswich in his opening remarks. It is important that schools are able to respond to their pupils' individual needs at this time. He is absolutely right about some of the language being used. From my own experience as a parent, but also from speaking to schools in my constituency, I know that what children have really missed is their usual group activities. On catch-up, I want extra funding to go to schools directly, rather than to outsourced private practitioners, so that they can address the problems that lockdown has caused schoolchildren. That would really help our students as they go back to school, which we are all so happy to see.

18:33:00

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con) [V]

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and to speak in this debate, covering a number of petitions about both the return to school and this year's assessments.

Obviously, the impact of covid on our schools, and therefore on our children and young people, has been huge. I would argue that it is perhaps still being underestimated. As I have said before in this place, personally I would not have closed schools. Being out of school for months has had a huge impact on the more than 1,000 vulnerable children in Nottinghamshire—that is just the county, excluding the city, so the number might be twice as high—who are known to children's services for one reason or another. There was a spike in the number of abuse referrals to children's services following last summer's lockdown, and I have no doubt that that will happen again now. We owe it to those children in particular to put them at the heart of our plans for recovery.

This is not just about vulnerable children; the issue has affected all children. I am lucky enough to be the father of two primary aged boys—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair)

I am sorry to interrupt, Mr Bradley, but your voice is not coming through very clearly. Could you try to speak a little more loudly or move a little closer to the microphone?

Ben Bradley

I will hold the microphone closer to my face.

It is not only vulnerable children who have been impacted by the lockdowns. I am lucky enough to be the father of two primary age boys, and they have been lucky enough mostly to continue to attend school, as my wife has worked on a supermarket shop floor throughout, but even they have missed their social lives and have missed out on a lot of experiences. They have seen both their education and development impacted. This time in the lives of our children and young people is hugely important, whether it is early development as a primary school student mastering the academic basics, learning to make friends, understanding the school environment and how to act around other people, or whether it is a teenager studying for major qualifications while also coming out of their shell and becoming an adult and finding themselves. How much more difficult must it be for them to begin to find their independence and their own self separate from their parents when they are forced to spend every day at home with them and they do not get to go and do anything else?

In terms of what we do about it—this is the key going forward—the Government have talked a lot about academic catch-up and tutoring, which is welcome, but the biggest challenge that parents and teachers have raised with me is a social one, not an academic one. Teachers have told me that children have forgotten what it means to be in school—how to act and behave—and having to relearn all of that after having changed those behaviours as they are not used to being around groups of people, seeing their friends or being in the classroom. They have shrunk back into their shells after having spent so much time on their own, and it is a challenge now to draw them out again. That means we need to focus not only on academia but on the social side of things.

We should offer more support to extracurricular activities, including sport. Let us not forget the health and fitness impact, too, and the inequalities that will have grown as a result of lockdown and the inactivity that came with it. We could start by looking seriously at how we can open up our sports facilities. Some 40% of our nation's sports facilities remain locked behind school gates at evenings and weekends.

We have to focus on transitioning children back into the classroom when they need it, and supporting teachers to do that. Children moving to secondary school this year, for example, will have missed so much of the transitional process that they normally would get. The Government could promote and support things such as nurture provision at both primary and secondary level to help children adapt and ease into school life at their own pace, rather than being chucked in at the deep end. I hope the Government will be able to support schools to deliver some year 7 transition as much as possible for the end of this year.

A few years ago, the then Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), launched a programme of introducing and

expanding mental health support in schools. I spoke to the Schools Minister recently about that. Will he update the House on any discussions about whether that plan, which at the time seemed wide ranging and positive, is considered still to be adequate, or can we speed it up and extend it in the light of the struggles that many will face as a result of the pandemic?

On the issue of academia, the Prime Minister's idea of one-to-one tutoring could be great if it could be done as an addition to the social support that is needed. It will be important to work across schools, colleges and universities to ensure that there is a recognition of the challenges that young people have faced and of the difference between grades given this year compared with other years, because clearly nobody should be disadvantaged as they seek to move on to the next stage of their lives.

All of that calls into question some of what we do around our assessment. I am no detractor from testing at all—I think it is important—but we saw the major challenges faced as a result of so much of our assessment being built only on exams at the end of the year. In the absence of those, there have been all sorts of problems. Obviously, other countries have different systems. Some have an ongoing system of teacher-led assessment as a matter of course. I wonder how the Minister feels those countries might have compared in terms of the challenges of assessment through this period.

I particularly question whether there is really a need to formally assess year 2 students, for example. Also, in the light of covid, perhaps we should be more willing to trust our teachers and to rely on their ongoing assessment as to what children in their care need. They are better placed to assess the ability and the support needed by children at a young age than an exam paper is, particularly if the needs of those children at four, five or six years old are more social as opposed to academic. Perhaps that is something we could look at. Teachers' knowledge of what their students need will be more important than ever as we seek to recover from the pandemic. Both teachers and students would benefit from having that trust in their relationship within schools to help support children.

There are lessons to take from online learning, too. Although some have struggled, others have loved it and have excelled. They have attended, whereas they might not have done before. There may be a role for using remote learning permanently in some instances. My local college reported excellent attendance among some of the students who had not been engaged or showing up before; it reported excellent work and excellent progress by, for example, many students with autism, who might have struggled in a classroom environment but found online learning really positive. Across the board, but perhaps particularly for post-16 and with SEND pupils, we should review how remote learning could benefit young people. I know that is part of the Prime Minister's plan for independent and individual tutoring.

Finally, I will touch on skills. I welcome the Government's further education White Paper, which has some excellent proposals for boosting and supporting further education. The Minister knows my view that many children would benefit from more access to technical and vocational education as part of their curriculum within school or from being allowed out to college earlier in their school life. I have always felt that is an opportunity for the 18% who currently leave school with no qualifications at all to do something different, and to fall in love with education through learning in a way that is directly linked to the world of work or to things they enjoy.

Given the impact on so many children who have been out of education for so long and the challenge of getting them back into the classroom and comfortable in the classroom again, I hope the Minister will give consideration to how that might work, not only as a chance to get young people back into learning after covid, but to complement the FE reforms that have been brought forward by the Government and to help all our young people to get the most out of education in the long term, including that 18% who previously have not managed to get those qualifications through traditional schooling.

With that, I will wrap up. I finish by saying that this is hugely important and, as I said at the start of my speech, we owe it to all our young people and our children to put them at the heart of our recovery plans. Ultimately, they are the ones who will have to deal with this for the longest, for the future of our country, our economy and all of us, and they should be front and centre of every decision we make as we look to recover from this pandemic.

18:41:00

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]

It is a pleasure to speak on this issue and to discuss education and covid-19.

The long-term damage to our children's education and social skills is something I have been incredibly concerned about. In February, I was able to highlight to the Minister, during the debate in the main Chamber on the roadmap to education, the work of the Northern Ireland Education Minister and the Northern Ireland Executive in providing funding for summer schools throughout the Province to help children catch up if needed. This is a devolved matter, but it was such a good scheme that I wanted to give the Minister in Northern Ireland some credit here.

The idea is that there will be funding for schools to run summer programmes of two to three weeks for children who have fallen behind. Teachers can choose to run the classes, or they can liaise with substitute teachers to provide the additional help, which will also allow those who depend on substituting to earn their money and help to fill the breach with education for children.

It is clear to me that covid has had a massive impact on education and I fully support the need to get children back to school as soon as it is safe to do so. Just today, the Minister in Northern Ireland set out a timetable for children's sporting activities to return to normal. I know that is something the Prime Minister and central Government in Westminster have been working towards as well, as indeed have all the devolved Administrations.

For some parents, home schooling has simply been unworkable due to work issues, internet connectivity or other concerns, and their children need additional support to pull them through. I know that sometimes the grandparents feel under incredible pressure. I have met some of them, and they just could not wait to get their grandchildren back to school, back to normality and back to a routine. I suppose grandparents have reared their children. As I have often said—this probably applies to you, too, Mr Robertson—it is great being a grandparent, because at 7 o'clock we can give them back, but if they are living with us and schooling with us, that opportunity is not there.

The home schooling and internet connectivity programme that I have referred to was run in some schools last summer and was incredibly successful, so I thank

the Northern Ireland Minister for making it possible again this summer. It is imperative that we do all we can to help children achieve their potential, despite this dreadful past year, and I believe summer schools are a step forward in doing just that.

It is further notable that the Education Minister in Northern Ireland has put aside £5 million especially for schools to determine how they can provide mental health support for pupils or staff as necessary. That could be in the form of outdoor equipment or individual counselling. I believe that must be replicated UK-wide, as our young people's mental health, along with that of the elderly, has suffered and needs dedicated support.

I do not think there has been a debate on covid-19 in which we have not spoken about the detrimental mental health conditions of our children of all ages, even those of primary school age, and especially those of secondary school and college age. I have heard of so many young children in Northern Ireland who are allowed to return to school and who have been so joyful since they were allowed back. On the other hand, I have also had several parents tell me how starting back at school in P1 has been a nightmare, with children screaming and hanging on to the streetlights because they are unwilling to go to school. Their wee minds are so full of fear and confusion.

It is clear that it is not just the little ones who are suffering. I have also heard parents talk of how their 14-year-olds have anxiety about returning to school. The routine, which is essential for stability, has been turned around, and they are finding themselves on very shaky ground. We need to take steps to steady that ground for them and to invest in additional pastoral care, outdoor equipment or even, when safety measures allow, trips in order to rebuild bonds and confidence. That is absolutely critical.

I truly believe that only time will tell the impact of lockdown, and the fear that it has brought, on our vulnerable children. We must be prepared to help effectively and swiftly when teachers pick up on those issues and problems, and they must have access to professional help for that child. We have lost so many, and we cannot afford to lose a new generation to fear and anxiety.

It has long been clear that it is the desire of the Democratic Unionist party and many others to see that children are brought safely back to school. Particularly with Northern Ireland's hugely successful vaccination programme having vaccinated the most vulnerable with one vaccine, which gives a good level of protection, the opening of schools is in a different position from ever before. Today I received my first vaccination for covid-19. It was almost painless and I was very pleased to get it. I give credit to the staff and volunteers who made the conveyor belt of vaccination so easy to endure, and I thank them for it.

I believe that we can open schools and still protect our vulnerable, as well as improve educational outcomes and address mental health concerns in our young people. That is an absolute priority for me, and I believe it is a priority for the Government as well. We must look to allow team games and after-school clubs for music, dance and theatre practices—all those normal experiences that have been lost to our young people for an entire year. I believe we must do what we can to enhance their opportunities in school and after school to the best of our ability, and we must trust God to restore mentally the year that the locusts have taken. Education is a priority; we have all said it, we all know it and we all believe it. Now we need to see that priority being actioned and also

financed appropriately.

18:47:00

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I am delighted to be present for what is an extremely important debate about the future of education, and particularly the impact of covid. As a member of the Education Committee, and following the almost weekly appearance that the Minister makes before us, I feel as though he and I are seeing each other much more than we are seeing our respective partners. I am delighted to be with him once again today. I am sure he will hear some repeats of the moans and groans at the last meeting of the Education Committee regarding this issue.

On the petitions about GCSEs and A-levels, I appreciate that the Government were in a very tricky situation. I fully respect that a decision was made more quickly than some would have the public believe, but the process was also laid out clearly for pupil, parents and teachers. I must say that my inbox has not seen a deluge of emails, unlike during the algorithm debacle that I am sure we are all desperate to forget.

However, I would like to stress some of my concerns—the Minister will be aware of these—about the fact that exam papers from exam boards are voluntary and not mandatory. I am aware that 100,000 people responded to the consultation and that the overwhelming majority of students were keen for the tests to be voluntary, but even if it is 41%—the Minister might have quoted the Education Committee, and I apologise if I have got that figure wrong—the overwhelming majority of teachers supported the fact that there should be some mandatory testing with the exam papers from exam boards. That is something that would have been very helpful to the evidence base.

Ultimately, the one thing that schools that I am speaking to are concerned about—I am particularly thinking about St Margaret Ward Catholic Academy in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, which I visited recently—is that there a very tight window in which to get assessments done. The angst comes from the fact that the Government announcement has come, yet it is a month until the guidance will follow. That has caused a lot of strain for teachers as they wonder what the exam boards will and will not allow and what they can and cannot do within this period of time.

I appreciate that the situation with testing is difficult for the Minister, but if kids are in school and get a positive lateral flow test, even if they then go home and get a negative polymerase chain reaction test, they are not allowed back into school. The school that I mentioned has seen 38 year 11s stay away for 10 days, which will ultimately have an impact on the evidence gathering that will need to take place.

I also have concerns about grade inflation and the impact on future years, and I have really pushed the issue of grade suppression with the Education Committee. Ultimately, grade inflation has taken place; we have seen it on quite a large scale. The summer of 2020 was more generous than previous years. At A-level, the proportion of candidates awarded an A\* or A went up an unprecedented 12.9 percentage points from 25.2% in 2019 to 38.1% in 2020. At GCSE, the proportion awarded grade 4 and above went up 8.8 percentage points from 67.1% to 75.9%.

My worry, as the Chair of the Education Committee regularly says, is that that

grade inflation will end up being baked into the system. Ultimately, there has to come a point where we draw a line in the sand. I hope to hear from the Minister, if not today then in the future, that when it comes to the 2020 cohort, the grade inflation of the past two years will be ring-fenced and blacked out, as it were, as an anomaly because we are in a global pandemic—these are unprecedented times—and that we will go back to 2019, pre-pandemic and before the summer grade inflation, in order to have a better gauge of where students are at.

My issue with the suppression is that ultimately there will be kids—particularly children from deprived backgrounds in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke—who are outperforming their peers in their schools and their schools' historical performance. I fear that teachers, out of fear of having a mass investigation, will ultimately keep grades lower because they do not want other pupils or the wider school to be impacted by Ofqual coming in to investigate. I fear that there will be kids who do not get the grades they deserve, particularly those in deprived communities such as the ones I am proud to serve, for that very reason.

I will say this to the Minister: well done. For the National Education Union to admit that it was wrong was a feat of excellence. I thoroughly enjoyed it and almost had it printed and put on my wall to celebrate. It admitted that it was wrong that the testing would not work. Well, it has worked really well. I saw it at first hand, both in the local primary schools that I visited—Whitfield Valley Primary Academy and St Margaret—which had form groups coming down and having the tests. It worked really smoothly and has given confidence to staff and students. It has meant that those who are asymptomatic are able to go home and therefore stop any spread. That is really positive.

Another issue is the national tutoring programme. The Minister is aware of my concerns about that. Although I absolutely support the aims and fully support the Minister—Teach First and the Education Endowment Foundation are very good providers and groups that have my full backing—my concern when we run big, central Government-style interventions such as that is whether they really get to the kids who need them. In my city, more than 30% of students are eligible for free school meals, and I wonder whether we will reach every single child who has a right to that tuition and support and deserves to have it. When I hear that, so far, only 125,000 out of 1.5 million kids have been reached, that raises concerns.

I want to pass on to the Minister the comments of Dominic McKenna, the headteacher at St Margaret Ward Catholic Academy, about Teach First. He has emailed it and engaged with it, and he has simply had an email back saying, "We'll get back to you." I appreciate that the Minister will not think that is good enough; he will want that follow-up to take place. Ultimately, he knows and understands the pressures that headteachers are under. On the one occasion that Dominic McKenna did hear back when he was asking for maths and English tutors, he was told that they were not available but was asked whether he wanted modern foreign languages. Those are still important, but if a school is asking for something and the service is not available, that raises questions about whether the national tutoring programme is going to work as well as it should.

We are talking about two years. I am sure that hon. Members will have concerns about the kids who drop out of education in a school setting, maybe going into colleges or apprenticeships. If they missed out in this academic year, will they get the opportunity to catch up in following years in different educational

settings? That is my concern with the programme: its aims are noble and its impact will be big, but will we actually get to every single child in those areas?

I will talk about some of my other pet peeves, which the Minister knows I am a fan of doing. If we are really going to sort out education, we need a standardised national written test in every school for all year groups—from reception to year 11—so that everyone does the same. At primary, it would be literacy and numeracy, and at secondary, it would be English, maths and science, so that we would have some actual data on the full impact of loss of learning. That would help schools to understand what they need to do to help their students catch up in the long term. I believe that a lot of kids will catch up much quicker than we think. Children are remarkably resilient, which I know, having been a balding head of year. I have just seen a shot of the back of my head on the screens here, and the balding is quite concerning. I think the kids might have accelerated that, and the receding hairline that my father has at 65 but which I have managed to achieve at 31.

I believe that kids are remarkably resilient. Being back in a school setting, in a routine, back among their peers and friends, and with their teachers, whom they trust and respect, will go a long way to rebalancing children overall, and mental health support can go where it is most needed. There is a huge pot of money in the sugar tax. I know that it has been put into school sports, but mental health and CAMHS is where that money should go, particularly in the short-term, but perhaps we could look at that in the longer-term, because there will be some mental health challenges. That does not necessarily mean that every children will need one-to-one support, but that sugar tax money could certainly unlock some small group work that could be really positive. The standardised test, as I said, is really important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), who is a fine speaker on issues of education, talked about sports facilities and the use of the school building. Those buildings are huge community assets, but in the summer the gates are closed, and unless the school is able to rent out any of its space, it goes unused. That is a crying shame. We should be doing so much more with schools in the local area, using them as part of the summer catch-up programme and beyond, to allow youth groups and external agencies to save themselves the overhead costs from their own buildings and to fund revenue schemes for those kids.

My final plug is for the Challenger Trust, whose chief executive officer is Charlie Rigby. I will declare an interest: I was a councillor for him in the ward of Shipston-on-Stour a long time ago, in 2011. The Challenger Trust does amazing work in Gateshead and Birmingham. It costs a 17th of the National Citizen Service and one seventh of OnSide Youth Zones. Rather than directly running programmes, the Challenger Trust works with local partnerships to support school leaders to choose programmes that have the maximum impact in extra-curricular opportunities. It takes children out of their schools and local areas to experience the things that people like me, who went to private school, were privileged enough to experience. I want every child, in every part of this country, to be able to access those same extra-curricular opportunities. That can be achieved only if we find more sustainable long-term funding solutions. Although the NCS is an admirable project, it is very much a short-term project for the summer, and it tends to attract, in my opinion, a lot of middle-class and upper-class children, and does not get into the deprived communities that desperately need it.

Overall, the petitioners—bless them—have done some really good work. Obviously, the Government have well and truly answered their questions well in advance. All I can say is that the teaching profession is an amazing profession—I loved being part of it for eight years—but it has been reputationally damaged. That is not the fault of teachers; the Department for Education needs to bear some responsibility for the fact that it has not always communicated in a timely fashion, which has put school leaders in a difficult situation because they are getting last-minute mixed messages, which causes difficulty with parents.

My biggest criticism, however, is of the National Education Union, which has been an absolute disgrace throughout this crisis, to be quite frank. It has been more interested in playing petty party politics than in getting schools reopen and actually helping the people it is meant to serve, who are children and teachers, all of whom wanted to be back in school.

Dr Mary Bousted is on £180,000-plus a year. Kevin Courtney is on over £200,000 a year—well above what the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom earns. I have said it on my social media, I have said it on radio interviews with Talk Radio, and I will say it in this Westminster Hall debate so that it is a matter of record in Hansard: they must resign with immediate effect. They have failed the teaching profession. They have failed the children whom those teachers are serving. They have damaged the reputation of the profession and led to the impression that teachers somehow went missing in this crisis, which could not be further from the truth.

19:00:00

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Robertson, and it is great to be back in a Westminster Hall debate, even if we are not back in Westminster Hall. These are great opportunities not just to discuss in usually a more collegial and convivial way some of the big challenges facing our country but, as we are seeing now, for members of the public to get their voice heard on issues that concern them.

Clearly, lots of water has gone under the bridge since the petitions reached the threshold for debate. Some of the issues that I will touch briefly on before focusing my remarks mainly on exams will be familiar to Members right across the House, but I will repeat them none the less for the benefit of the petitioners. Obviously, lots of people were concerned about the safety of schools and the safe opening of schools. We saw in a number of petitions, not least these, a clamour for schools to be closed. I have to say, particularly in the light of the lived experience of children and young people during the course of lockdown, closing schools ought to be the very last resort, and they should be the last thing to close and the first to reopen. We know that any time out of school, let alone the significant time out of school that children and young people have had, can have a detrimental impact in terms of both learning and their mental health and wellbeing.

Despite the best efforts of schools to keep children learning from home, we know that none the less some children from certain backgrounds and with certain challenges have faced a much more difficult time in accessing online learning, not least because even as schools returned last week the Department for Education was just about scraping in with its own target of getting laptops and devices out to children and young people. Tens of thousands of children are still without the devices they needed, and hundreds of thousands of children are

receiving the devices far later than they should have.

None the less, there have been some concerns about safety in the classroom, both from children and young people and from staff working in schools. We believe that the Government really should have done a lot more a lot sooner on that front. I am delighted to see mass testing being rolled out and I hope that it continues to be a success in the way that we have heard described in this debate. Indeed, we called for mass testing to be rolled out late last year, so it is disappointing that it took until this point in 2021 for mass testing to be rolled out.

We also think that the Government missed a significant opportunity to vaccinate all school staff during the half-term. President Biden's Administration are currently in the process of vaccinating teachers. We were pushing for that not simply on the grounds of safety but because, as I think we are already beginning to see, there is still a challenge of keeping children in school learning. One of the biggest challenges that headteachers had, particularly when schools returned in September, was staff shortages, with teachers going off sick themselves. We think that the Government ought to have vaccinated all staff, and we regret that that has not happened.

I am afraid to say that we still see too many examples of schools being short-changed when it comes to safety measures. Indeed, schools in my constituency have written to me because the funding that they have shelled out for personal protective equipment and other safety measures is not being reimbursed by the Department for Education. What does that mean? It means headteachers robbing Peter to pay Paul—taking funding from one area of the school budget and putting it into these extraordinary safety measures. That is a source of deep regret.

Jonathan Gullis

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the schools that were in sound financial places pre-pandemic have been hit hardest when it comes to the financial support that they have received, which has been very little. That has meant that a lot of them have ended up eating into their reserves and their positive bank balances. Does he agree that those schools, which will now be judged by Ofsted and could potentially receive an inadequate rating for their finances, need to be reimbursed, particularly when cleaning costs in some schools are up to £4,000 a month?

Wes Streeting

I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman. The fact that these are cross-party concerns should tell the Minister that there is a problem here that still needs to be addressed. These are extraordinary, one-off costs. I want to see every penny of schools' budgets being directed to learning and teaching, and providing the support that pupils need, not least given the disruption to their education over the last year. It is regrettable if headteachers are having to raid budgets that would normally be going towards pupils' education to fund safety measures. I hope the Minister will take that point away and reconsider.

I want to address the points about exams. Before I do that, I am afraid I have to start disagreeing with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). He made a number of partisan attacks on the National Education Union, which was not helpful. We are in the middle of a national crisis and education unions, whether they are representing teaching staff, support staff or staff in leadership positions, have a responsibility to speak up for the concerns of

their members.

Whether it is the National Education Union, the Association of School and College Leaders, the National Association of Head Teachers, NASUWT, the Voice section of Community, Unite, Unison or the GMB, all of whom represent staff in schools, they have tried to convey the concerns of their members in a responsible way, to which we, as policy makers, should pay attention. That does not mean that we always agree with them; indeed, there have been points during the pandemic when we have not been on the same page as the National Education Union and where the unions have not been on the same page as each other. That is the nature of representative trade unions representing the concerns of their members.

Given the extraordinary challenges we have seen and the level of stress and anxiety faced by staff, what we have had from the education unions during the pandemic has been measured—sometimes robust, but none the less measured—reflections of their members' concerns. I do not think it is helpful to attack them in the way we have just seen.

I turn to the issue of exams and what needs to be done. The overarching message is that the Minister and the Department have to learn lessons from the mistakes that they have been making throughout the pandemic. First and foremost, we want to avoid a repeat of last year's shambles. The Government's grading algorithm was an unmitigated disaster. About 40% of teacher A-level predictions in England were downgraded by the algorithm. Pupils from working-class backgrounds were more likely to have seen a bigger downward adjustment from the algorithm than those from more affluent backgrounds, and the attainment gap between pupils on free school meals and those who were not got significantly higher in terms of the number of A grades received.

There is something to learn from that whole miserable experience in terms of how the Secretary of State for Education himself handled it. He put alternatives to the algorithm in place at the very last minute and announced that the system would be switched to a triple lock before Ofqual had signed it off. Indeed, Ofqual was told about the plan only on 11 August, two days before results day—talk about lastminute.com. Through his triple lock, the Education Secretary said students could use a valid mock, but he did not direct Ofqual to consider what might constitute a valid mock until results day itself. Again, that is not just last minute, but after the event. Only after several days of chaos did the Education Secretary relent and revert to using unstandardised centre assessed grades.

Having had that awful experience and put young people and their teachers through real chaos and anxiety after A-level results day, the Government have been slow again to plan for this year's exams, even after last year's shambles. It was not until October last year that the Government announced a three-week delay for exams in 2021. We said then that the Government ought to have a plan B in place just in case exams could not take place—if the spread of the virus was such that exams as usual could not happen—but the Government did not act. Even when the Government cancelled exams in January, they still did not have a plan B. That should have been done months before, as we had called for.

There was also the BTEC fiasco. We had just an appalling situation in which, even as the Education Secretary announced that all schools were to close at the beginning of January—having just summoned millions of children back into school for the day—he caused additional stress and confusion by insisting that BTEC

exams to be taken that month, and indeed some that week, ought to go ahead.

Jonathan Gullis

With regard to BTECs, will the hon. Gentleman not agree that even though students were brought in for those exams, they were actually for courses and subjects in which exams are required to have been taken in order for them to get the qualification and therefore give employers the confidence that they have the necessary skills to carry out their duties? It is something that they legally have to do. A subject such as English or maths is obviously a very different thing altogether.

Wes Streeting

The problem with the BTEC handling back in January was that the Department was saying two things at the same time. It was saying that these BTEC exams were going ahead, but then, following an outcry and concerns about whether that would be safe, it said:

“In light of the evolving public health measures”–

I am quoting from the DFE statement–

“schools and colleges can continue with the vocational and technical exams that are due to take place in January, where they judge it right to do so.”

That just added to the confusion and chaos. The issue was not just pupils sitting at home, trying to prepare for exams that were taking place literally the next day or in the coming days; it was also that their teachers were unable to give clear answers. This goes back to the point that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North raised about the invidious position that school leaders and teachers have been put in by the chaos and confusion and dither and delay that have come out of the DFE. They were not clear on what was going on–the communication was poor for them–so the very people to whom students usually look to provide clear answers and strong advice and leadership simply were not able to provide it, through no fault of their own.

That left us in the absurd situation in which, according to the Education Secretary, about a third of colleges chose to continue with exams in January, while the rest did not. He then backtracked and cancelled BTEC exams in February and March. Again, he eventually got to the right decision, but why did he not see it coming and why could he not take decisive action in a way that told all students and all staff exactly where they stood and what he planned to do about it?

Let me turn now to some of the other challenges facing us ahead of assessments this summer. The first is on private candidates. There has been concern, throughout the changes to examinations, that about 20,000 private candidates not affiliated with schools and colleges this year will be disadvantaged. Many students have been told that they have to pay hundreds or even thousands of pounds for local exam centres and schools to assess them, and schools do not necessarily have the resources to do that. Again, more for the benefit of people watching the debate than people in the Chamber, I point out that we are not talking about privately educated students; we are talking about private candidates, who are entering themselves privately for examinations. Many of these private candidates are students who were not happy with their centre assessed grades last year. They feel that they are being denied the opportunity to take exams and prove that they deserve better grades. They are worried about

whether they are even going to get a centre to take them on.

I acknowledge that today there has been an announcement from the Department that schools will receive a subsidy for every private candidate who is entered for a qualification. I think that that will go some way to incentivising centres to take these students on. I am concerned that, in relation to a very small number of subjects but none the less a number of subjects, the fees to enter students for these exams are more than the £200 that I think the Department is offering. Could the Minister speak to that point in particular?

I wonder, because this is the question that we are getting from students, what consideration the Department and Ofqual gave to allowing private candidates to sit some form of exams. The Minister will understand that the concern of these students is that a system that relies on teacher assessment will be inherently disadvantageous or, perhaps, practically impossible if the centre does not have a relationship with the private candidates.

These are just some of the quotes that I have from private candidates expressing their concerns. One told PoliticsHome:

“With the promise of 2021 exams, I was hopeful that I could redeem myself in my other two A Levels...It’s clear that the government thinks of us as afterthoughts...We’re not just going to sit back whilst they toy with our futures. We want a solution that works for everybody.”

Another student who was downgraded last year said:

“I decided to put my life on hold for another year and resit my exams this summer as the university kindly reinstated my offer. I made the decision not to give up on my dreams and not settle for a grade I strongly believed was too low. I put an extreme amount of effort into revising everyday so that I am able to move on...I am absolutely devastated for private and resit candidates that exams have been cancelled again this year as they are, in vast majority of cases, not able to get a [teacher-assigned] grade.”

Will the Minister explain to those students the practical challenges of their being able to sit an exam? What reassurance can he provide that they will be able to sign up with another school, college or assessment centre and receive a properly validated grade that reflects their abilities and efforts in the way that they hope, as students who are resitting?

My final point about this year’s exams is about the immense pressure that we are already beginning to see inflicted on teachers and headteachers as a result of the appeals system that seems to have been outlined in the guidance. One of my own secondary schools wrote to me quoting the guidance, which says:

“To reduce the number of errors made and, in turn the volume of appeals, centres will be expected to tell their students the evidence on which their grades will be based, before the grades are submitted to exam boards. This will allow issues associated with, for example, absence, illness or reasonable adjustments to be identified and resolved before grades are submitted.”

There is something to commend in the approach that students must understand the basis on which they are being judged—of course, that is absolutely right. It is also absolutely right that mitigating factors ought to be taken into account, and in a transparent way. However, I think we are all concerned about the

implication that pupils or pushy parents with sharp elbows will be able to-picking up on reasonable adjustments in particular-effectively demand from teachers and headteachers different grades from the ones the teacher has judged to be right. That puts schools in a really invidious position.

By the way, this should be regarded as a gentle warning to those who regularly make demands for a whole series of exams to be scrapped that the grass is not always greener on the other side. This is not to say that teacher judgment cannot play a role, but leaving a system significantly to teacher judgment in the way that this has been puts enormous pressure on teachers. My concern is that it will also bake in deeper disadvantage because sharp-elbowed middle-class parents will be in there demanding adjustments to grades, and other parents will not. I wonder what the Minister might say in response to that, in terms of the approach to this year's exams.

Finally, on next year's exams, if the Education Secretary has not learned from the absolute fiasco last summer and the absolute fiasco in January, and the completely last-minute way in which he made a decision about exams in 2021, please, for the love of God, I hope he has made some judgments about exams in 2022. We already have students on GCSE, A-level and BTEC courses expecting to sit exams in 2022. There is simply no good reason why the Department for Education and Ofqual should not be able to tell those students what exams in 2022 will look like.

Indeed, Ofqual's acting chief regulator, Simon Lebus, told the Education Committee last week:

"So far as 2022 is concerned, the thinking at the moment is about adaptations along the line that had originally been contemplated for this year, when exams were still to go ahead."

Furthermore, the Minister for School Standards said:

"We are working now on what decisions we will take for 2022, because we know there has been disruption, but we will have more to say on that later in the year."

I am afraid that "later in the year" is really not good enough. It is really inexplicable-these issues and the choices available to exam boards and Ministers about mitigations and adjustments to exams are well known and were debated and discussed ahead of exams potentially taking place in 2021. Why are these decisions not ready to go? Why are we not providing clarity and certainty to schools, teachers and students, who are crying out for them? I find it unfathomable that we are not providing clear instruction and guidance to students who are on these courses right now, wondering what they should be studying for and towards, and what their exams will look like.

Of course, adjustments are necessary. Looking at the Department's own data, we estimated that year 10 pupils have missed one in eight days of GCSE teaching. The situation may not be quite so severe at A-level because we always expect there to be a greater degree of independent learning, but none the less there will be some degree of learning loss, and we know that the challenges faced by students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds will be greater.

Last week, I met school leaders from Newham sixth forms. Both the principals present were very clear that scant information is coming from the Government and

that they need certainty now. Uncertainty is piling on the pressure facing pupils and their teachers. The longer Ministers dither and delay, the harder it will be to make meaningful adjustments for exams to go ahead in a way that is fair to all pupils.

Ministers need to learn from their mistakes and act sooner, rather than later. If the Education Secretary did not feel battered and bruised from his previous encounters with exams, and motivated to do something different, something earlier and something decisive, there really is no hope for him.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair)

Minister, you will need to leave a couple of minutes for Mr Hunt to wind up.

19:21:00

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Robertson.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) on how he opened the debate. I am sure he will join me in recognising the enormous professionalism and commitment of school staff working in our schools and with their students throughout the lockdown to continue education and progress towards assessments, whether students were being taught on site or remotely.

Today we are debating four petitions and it is worth noting that the context has changed significantly since they were first submitted. Two of them are about school reopening for the majority of pupils and students. One requests a delay to full opening until May and the other requests that schools in what were previously tier 4 areas remain closed to the majority of pupils.

Secondly, there are two petitions focusing on exams. One requests that BTECs be assessed by teacher-predicted grades, while the other requests cancellation of the 2021 GCSE and A-level exams. Finally, I want to outline higher education recovery plans, to demonstrate the further work being developed to help pupils and students to recover any lost learning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich is right that we need to be cautious about over-generalising about how children have fared during lockdown. He is also right to raise the issue of special educational needs and the impact of covid on the most vulnerable children. Special schools, of course, have mostly been open to pupils during lockdown. We have consistently prioritised specialist settings in our recovery premiums. Both special schools and alternative provision will be funded to provide summer schools and the national tutoring programme. We have also announced a £42 million package of continued support for children with SEND and their families during this difficult period.

Both my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich and my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) raised the issue of pupil mental health. We know that the pandemic is impacting children's mental health and that, for most pupils, time out of school will have limited their social interaction. That is why the Government are continuing to prioritise mental health and wellbeing support for children and staff as they return to school. The Department has convened a mental health in education action group to consider how to support children and young people's mental health as they return to school. That will build on the support provided through the Wellbeing for Education Return training programme.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) asked about face coverings. We have published a summary of the evidence as schools opened. They are one more measure in a system of controls designed to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus. SAGE has advised that face coverings can be effective in reducing transmission in public and community settings. Their effectiveness stems mostly from reducing the emission of virus-carrying particles when worn by an infected person.

Although some have been anxious about the return to school from 8 March, returning to face-to-face education in schools and colleges is a national priority. The return to school last week was a huge success, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) celebrated in his remarks. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the teachers and support staff who have worked so hard in preparing schools, as well as in providing remote education while most pupils were at home.

I saw first-hand, on the Friday before the schools opened on 8 March, a school in Portsmouth preparing for that return—getting children tested, even in the week before schools opened, in a systematic and organised way. On Monday, I visited a primary school in Streatham and saw the joy on the children's faces as they returned to school and to being with their friends.

There is clear evidence that time out of education can be detrimental to children's future prospects and earning potential, with implications also for the long-term productivity of the economy. By February half-term, the Institute for Fiscal Studies reported that the total loss in face-to-face education time was half a normal school year for children right across the UK. Despite huge efforts across industry and the Government to ensure that all pupils had appropriate technology for remote teaching, such as the 1.2 million laptops and tablets that have been delivered to date to schools, trusts and local authorities, pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately affected by the lack of digital equipment and study space to participate effectively.

Younger pupils have also found it more challenging to engage in remote education. Schools, teachers and parents have worked tirelessly to continue the education of their pupils and students, but there is no substitute for time with a qualified teacher. The negative effects are also likely to extend beyond educational attainment, with NHS research suggesting that one in six young people may now have a mental health problem, up from one in nine in 2017.

The vaccination roll-out has been successful: 24 million people in this country have been vaccinated and, as Sam Freedman has pointed out, in countries of over 10 million people we are the world's leader by a margin in having such a successful roll-out. That success means that infections and hospitalisations are falling, paving the way for the safe and gradual lifting of restrictions. We are also heading into the spring, when we would expect the prevalence of respiratory diseases to fall.

Although restrictions on attendance in schools have been removed, other restrictions remain in place to ensure that transmission rates remain low across the country. It is hugely important, of course, that we all continue to obey those restrictions. In addition, schools will continue to implement protective measures as set out in the system of controls. Regular testing of children further reduces the risk of transmission in schools.

In relation to remaining open in areas previously categorised as tier 4, as mentioned in one of the petitions, I note that we are seeing significant decreases in cases across almost all parts of the country and all age groups. In the absence of significant regional disparity, the Government decided to ease restrictions at the same time across the whole of England. Due to the current, relatively uniform spread of the virus across the country, the four steps out of lockdown set out in the road map are designed to apply to all regions.

We have been clear, however, that the return is dependent on the data against the four tests, as set out in the road map. The road map therefore gives indicative “no earlier than” dates for the steps, which are five weeks apart. Those dates are wholly contingent on the data and are subject to change if those four tests are not met.

I turn to exams. We did not want to cancel exams in either 2020 or 2021. We believe that exams are the best and fairest form of assessment for students to show what they know and what they can do. It was only in the unprecedented circumstances of the outbreak of covid that we had to make the very difficult decision to cancel exams as part of the wider measures to protect public health. This year, under different circumstances, the decision that exams could no longer go ahead as planned was made to ensure fairness among an exam cohort who had received differing amounts of face-to-face education, given the further disruption to students’ education in January and the varying need in different parts of the country to self-isolate during the autumn term. This summer, we will trust teachers’ professional judgment to award grades based on a range of evidence.

We worked on the contingency for exams being cancelled during the autumn term, which is why Ofqual and the DFE were able to consult on the details of the alternative to exams on 15 January, just 11 days after the announcement of the lockdown. Ofqual launched a joint consultation with the DFE on 15 January, with details of how grades would be awarded, the quality assurance approaches that we would be taking and details of the appeals process. We have received more than 100,000 responses to the consultation, over half of which were from students. Students will now receive grades determined by their teachers, with assessments covering what they were taught, not what they missed. Teachers have a good understanding of their students’ performance and how they compare with other students this year and in previous years.

We have given teachers the flexibility to use a range of evidence, including through the use of optional questions by exam boards, mock exams, non-exam assessment for coursework and in-class tests. My hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich and for Stoke-on-Trent North asked for the exam material to be a mandatory part of the range of evidence that teachers will use to support the grade that they submit. We asked in the consultation whether such materials should be compulsory, and the optionality option was the overwhelming response. As I said last week to the Select Committee, we did not want to introduce a mini-exam by the back door, having just cancelled exams because they were not a fair way to assess people’s qualifications.

We want teachers to feel supported while making their decisions and will provide guidance to enable them to make assessments fairly and consistently. There will be internal and external quality assurance processes to identify errors and make consistent judgments. To support students who believe that their final grade is wrong, there will be a right to appeal. We also want to be fair to all students, regardless of the type of qualification they are taking.

We announced on 25 February the arrangements this summer for awarding vocational and technical qualifications that are similar to GCSEs and A-levels and that use progression to further or higher education. External exams for those qualifications are not viable; instead, results will be awarded through similar arrangements to those for GCSEs and A-levels. There will be teacher-assessed grades, and many BTECs will therefore receive teacher-assessed grades as well. Functional skills qualifications are unlike GCSEs and VTQs in their qualification and assessment structure. They are taken by a wide range of pupils and students, including adults. Some VTQ courses are much smaller than those for GCSE and can be taken on demand when the students are ready. Therefore, all efforts should be made to allow pupils and students to take an assessment in line with public health measures or remotely. Where that is not possible, teacher-assessed grades will be made available for awarding.

Where students are taking vocational qualifications to enter employment directly and where technical competence needs to be demonstrated, exams and assessments will continue in line with public health measures. That is so that students can demonstrate the necessary occupational or professional standard and start work in a safe way.

The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) raised the issue of private candidates. We are determined to ensure that private candidates can receive a grade this year. We are capping the fees that centres can charge and subsidising the extra costs that schools will face in assembling the evidence to support a grade. The Joint Council for Qualifications will shortly publish a list of schools and colleges that will provide support to private candidates in being awarded a qualification.

We recognise that extended school and college restrictions have had a substantial impact on children and young people's education, and we are committed to helping pupils to make up any education lost as a result of the pandemic. No pupil's long-term prospects should suffer as a consequence of what has happened over the last year. In January 2021, the Prime Minister committed to working with parents, teachers and schools to develop a long-term plan to support schools and pupils to make up that lost education. As part of this, in February we appointed Sir Kevan Collins as the education recovery commissioner, to advise on the approach to education recovery and the development of a long-term plan to help pupils make up lost education.

As an immediate step, we have made available funding of £1.7 billion to support education recovery. In June 2020, we announced, as part of that £1.7 billion, a £1 billion catch-up package, including a national tutoring programme and a catch-up premium for this academic year. In February, we committed a further £702 million to fund summer schools, expand our tutoring programme and fund a recovery premium for the next academic year. That £702 million is also part of the £1.7 billion. Over this Parliament, as we continue to learn and understand what more is needed to help students to recover lost education, we will ensure that support is delivered in a way that works for young people and for the sector.

The return to school on 8 March was, rightly, the first step in our road map to recovery and it has been successfully delivered, thanks to education staff across the country, with primary attendance high and secondary school attendance rising steadily throughout the week. We will continue to be led by the data when taking each step in the road map, and there are contingencies in place if any

actions need to be taken in the event of extremely high prevalence of coronavirus over the coming months. GCSEs, AS-levels and A-levels have been cancelled for summer 2021, along with many BTECs and other VTQs, with students instead being awarded grades based on assessment by their teachers.

Education recovery is a firm focus of the Government, with the appointment of the education recovery commissioner and the announcement of increased funding to enable a variety of activities to help with refreshing the academic and social lives of pupils and students. School and college staff have been asked rapidly to become IT experts, health and safety experts, test facilitators and examiners this year. I would like to finish by once again thanking them wholeheartedly for all their work, their commitment and their professionalism.

19:37:00

Tom Hunt

It is still a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, as it was at the start. I thank the Minister for his response, which was comprehensive and certainly addressed many of the points that I raised. There is a problem with some petitions in particular, in that there has been a lot of water under the bridge, but a lot of hon. Members dwelled on the petition on exams and assessment. I hope that many of their concerns have been alleviated.

I appreciate that there was a consultation and that a decision was made that tests should not be mandatory, but I hope that means that any children who could benefit from a test do not feel that they are being shut out. If a child and/or their parents go to a teacher and say, "Look, we really do think that our child could benefit from having a test," I hope that the teacher will be responsive and listen. I understand why it is not compulsory, but I hope there will be flexibility.

I hope that teachers exercise flexibility as well and are sensitive to the fact that not all children are the same, not all of them learn in the same way and some benefit more than others from exams. I am encouraged by a lot of what I have heard from the Minister, and from the recovery commissioner when he came to the Education Committee, about giving teachers flexibility and respecting that they often know best for their children and that the individual child needs to be at the heart of all this.

In terms of the teaching profession, the issues of recruitment and retention, which were issues before the pandemic, are obviously even greater now. I have been encouraged by some of the stats I have seen. The number of applications has gone up. In many senses we could say that the behaviour of certain unions has not helped, but in other respects we have often seen teachers acting heroically, in terms of the work they have put in to get their schools ready. Certainly, schools and teachers in my own constituency have worked to provide support beyond the academic. I mentioned Copleston High School in east Ipswich, which has set up a community pop-up shop to help children at the school, and some of the work that has been done is exceptional. In some senses, I think the way that people perceive the teaching profession has gone up, but those issues around teacher recruitment and retention are obviously very important and need to be looked at.

I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been to be an education Minister over the last year. No Government have been in this position before, and of course it is very easy to criticise. It is very easy to say, "Well, in

hindsight, you should have done this and you should have done that.” That is not to say that the Government have not made mistakes. It is not to say that, on occasion, they could have been better with the comms. It is just to say that I think it is important that we recognise the huge challenge of what it must be to be an education Minister during this pandemic.

When I talk to parents and teachers, there have been occasions when we have had difficult conversations. They have criticised the Government, and they have criticised various things that have happened—January being one case, the algorithm being another—but I have to say that in the last couple of weeks I have had two conversations with two headteachers who have been incredibly complimentary about many of the things that have happened.

When we talk about the laptops getting out, bearing in mind the scale of the operational logistics, sadly there will be examples when not all that equipment got to where it needed to be, but I would also say that more often than not it has, and I have spoken to headteachers in my constituency who have been incredibly grateful for that, including the headteacher of Stoke High School, which probably has the most deprived catchment in Ipswich. He has had hundreds of laptops delivered, which have benefited children at that school. That is something that I also think needs to be recognised.

I know that there is a bit of a debate about the National Education Union, and I have to say that I probably sympathise with the interpretation of that particular issue by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). This has been an incredibly difficult situation for pupils, for teachers, for schools and for the Government, and I think that at various times the National Education Union could have acted in a much more constructive way, but unfortunately it has not. Because of that, I think it has made a difficult situation even more difficult, and I think it has been motivated by political point-scoring far too much. I sometimes question whether schools would have been open at all over the last year if it had had its way. They probably would have been closed, and they would still be closed now.

When it comes to teachers being prioritised for a vaccine, I have to say that I was sympathetic to the arguments, particularly before it became clear what a huge success our vaccination programme is. I thought we just needed to get the schools open. If doing that helps the situation, let us go down that route. Publicly, I have sympathy for that view. I had one school in my constituency approach me to say, “Look, logistically, we think we can do it. We’ve got all the resources. If we can get the vaccine, we think we can vaccinate all teaching staff in Suffolk within two weeks.” I was open to working with that school. What was really interesting is that this all ended up in the Mail on Sunday, and there were some quotes in there from the NEU, totally dismissing it.

Here is an example of people in the education sector wanting to roll their sleeves up and say, “Right, let’s do this,” and just being shot down by the NEU, which effectively said that all teaching staff need both doses. That was my interpretation of what it was saying. If it had had its way, there would not be any schools open until every single member of the teaching staff had had two doses—how long would that take?

There has been anxiety from teachers in my constituency about the fact that they have not been prioritised for the vaccine. They have made it clear to me that, heading up to 8 March, that was one of their key concerns, but I think that with each day and each week that goes by, and given the remarkable progress that we

are making as a country in the number of people we are vaccinating, those concerns are being alleviated. As we vaccinate more people in their 50s, and soon those in their 40s, most teaching staff who would have been more vulnerable to the virus have been vaccinated as part of the general process anyway. I think that is to be recognised, as is the fact that we are doing so much better than almost any other country in the world.

On the whole, we need consistency and clarity going forward, particularly on next year's assessments, as the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) mentioned. We should provide clarity and consistency as early as possible. I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North said about having a national test to get a much better understanding of the extent to which there has been learning loss, and for each child, because we cannot make assumptions about what their particular experience has been.

We have a huge challenge ahead of us, but I am confident that the Government are very aware of that. I hope that the petitioners who signed these petitions, though perhaps not looking at this debate and thinking—

19:45:00

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).