

Witness Name: John Fitzpatrick

Statement No.: First

Exhibits: 835

Dated: 06 Aug 2025

## UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

---

### CORPORATE WITNESS STATEMENT OF JOHN FITZPATRICK

---

I, John Fitzpatrick, will say as follows: -

#### 1. SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

##### Introduction

- 1.1. I am a senior civil servant and serve as Director of the Public Inquiry Response Unit (PIRU) in the Cabinet Office. I have held this position since April 2022. I make this corporate witness statement in my capacity as the former Director of Education and Wider Public Services in the Covid-19 Taskforce (CTF) within the Cabinet Office between December 2020 and March 2022.
- 1.2. This corporate witness statement is produced to address questions that have been raised in a Request for Evidence pursuant to Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 and sent to the Cabinet Office on 24 September 2024. The statement has been prepared with the assistance of Counsel and the Government Legal Department.
- 1.3. In respect of Module 8 of the Inquiry, in this statement I set out the roles and responsibilities of the Cabinet Office including No.10 in relation to children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, due to the magnitude of work undertaken across government, local government, education, early years, universities, healthcare, social care and justice, as well as the volume of material that relates to children and young people, this statement is not a comprehensive account of all relevant activity carried out by the Cabinet Office including No.10.

- 1.4. The relevant period for Module 8, as specified by the Inquiry, is 1 January 2020 to 28 June 2022. For the period prior to 21 December 2020, I was the Director of Policy and Strategy for Government Automation in the Cabinet Office, and therefore my statement relies entirely on papers and accounts provided by others who worked in the Cabinet Office including No.10 at the time. From 21 December 2020 to 31 March 2022, my statement draws in part on my direct experience, as well as on papers and accounts provided by others who worked in the Cabinet Office including No.10 at the time. I took up the post of Director of Education and Wider Public Services on 21 December 2020, following the departure of my predecessor Sean Harford earlier that month.
- 1.5. From 1 April 2022, the CTF was stood down and I became the Director responsible for the Cabinet Office's response to the COVID-19 Inquiry. Therefore, for the final months of the relevant period, my statement relies entirely on papers and accounts provided by others who worked in the Cabinet Office including No.10 at the time.
- 1.6. It should be noted that the Cabinet Office has provided the Inquiry with significant volumes of evidence relevant to Module 8 in previous modules of the Inquiry. In particular:
- 1.6.1. Module 1 (Resilience and preparedness): where relevant, this statement summarises the information provided in the Module 1 corporate statements<sup>1</sup> and offers additional detail where specific decisions related to children and young people.
- 1.6.2. Module 2 (Core decision-making): this statement summarises the information provided in the Module 2 corporate statements<sup>2</sup> in respect of overall decision-making structures. Where relevant, this statement also repeats evidence provided in Module 2 in respect of decisions taken on non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs). These interventions impacted the whole of society, including children and young people. This statement focuses on where NPIs related specifically to children and young people.
- 1.6.3. Module 4 (Vaccines)<sup>3</sup> and Module 7 (Test, Trace and Isolate)<sup>4</sup>: this statement repeats or expands upon evidence provided in these modules. Predominantly the Cabinet Office's aim in these areas was to help keep children and young people

---

<sup>1</sup> JF/001 - INQ000145912, JF/002 - INQ000182612, JF/003 - INQ000195845, JF/004 - INQ000215620: Witness statements of Roger Hargreaves for Module 1

<sup>2</sup> JF/005 - INQ000092893: Cabinet Office corporate witness statement of Simon Case for Module 2; JF/006 - INQ000248852: Cabinet Office corporate witness statement of James Bowler and Simon Ridley, in respect of the Covid-19 Taskforce

<sup>3</sup> JF/007 - INQ000474418: Witness statement of Helen Dickinson for Module 4

<sup>4</sup> JF/008 - INQ000587352: Cabinet Office corporate witness statement of Jessie Owens for Module 7

in education settings - for example, by driving cross-government coordination on mass testing in schools.

### Executive Summary

1.7. To understand the Cabinet Office's role in respect of children and young people it is important to bear the following points in mind.

- 1.7.1. **The Cabinet Office including No.10 sits at the centre of government.** The Cabinet Office including No.10 primarily fulfils a core coordination role - supporting and advising the Prime Minister and Cabinet Office ministers, and facilitating Cabinet and collective decision-making across government. As such, it monitors the delivery priorities of other departments, seeking to ensure they remain on track, while also brokering decisions between departments and building consensus on policies across other government departments, who in turn have relationships with their respective sectors.
- 1.7.2. **DHSC had and continues to have overall responsibility for putting in place arrangements to mitigate the potential impacts of pandemics, while DfE was and remains responsible for the education sector as well as children's social care and safeguarding.** The Cabinet Office including No.10 did not and does not have a role in day-to-day decisions on the delivery of services to children and young people or in liaising routinely with stakeholders such as schools and local authorities.
- 1.7.3. **Before and in the very early stages of the pandemic, up until March 2020, there was a general consensus within the UK Government and with the devolved administrations that the closure of schools should be avoided, broadly in line with the preparedness plans for pandemic influenza.** Departments' pandemic response plans evolved throughout January to March 2020, and this work fed into the impact assessment for what ultimately became the Coronavirus Act 2020.
- 1.7.4. **While COVID-19 was a novel virus and there was significant uncertainty about its nature and potential impact, the understanding of the Cabinet Office including No.10 was that the direct risk to the health of children and young people from COVID-19 was low.** The scientific understanding of the role of children and young people in transmission of the virus to other cohorts of the population evolved throughout the pandemic. In March 2020, a principal driver of

the decision to close schools to most children was the impact of schools being open on the transmission of COVID-19 in the community. By July 2020, evidence emerged that the role of children and young people in the transmission of COVID-19 was more limited than previously thought, and the scientific advice reflected that new understanding. As the pandemic progressed, the non-health impacts on children and young people, particularly those that were already vulnerable - also became more evident. Together, these two factors underpinned the policy position maintained by the government throughout the rest of the relevant period; that restrictions on educational attendance should be used as a last resort.

- 1.7.5. **Balancing the pandemic's health, economic and social impacts was a key consideration for the Cabinet Office, including No.10, during the COVID-19 response.** The Cabinet Office including No.10 was engaged in decisions on education due to the complexity and wide range of possible impacts that restricting school attendance had on children and young people, public health and the economy. There was also a need to analyse data from across sectors - whilst DfE was primarily concerned with the impacts on education, children and young people, the data needed to be considered in a wider context and balanced against broader economic and societal impacts.
- 1.7.6. **It was the responsibility of DfE to ensure that schools could continue to teach whilst closed to most children.** The Cabinet Office had a role in monitoring the readiness and effectiveness of remote education and the contingencies in place for children outside of school. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was no existing national delivery chain and existing e-learning platforms were highly variable, as was access to e-learning at home. Early on, the Cabinet Office drove cross-government efforts on supply levels of devices and connectivity. The Cabinet Office monitored the percentage of schools providing remote education and, increasingly, the quality of remote education being delivered to drive standards higher.
- 1.7.7. **In the early stages of the pandemic, the approach to further education settings aligned with the response for schools.** Throughout the pandemic, DfE maintained and updated separate guidance for further education settings to ensure any differences in approach were communicated. As the pandemic progressed, there was sometimes a need for divergence, such as where age was a significant factor. In these instances, the Cabinet Office coordinated

cross-government work to support those attending further education settings, for example the prioritisation of vaccinations for 16-17 year olds, and on isolation exemptions for those attending further education settings.

1.7.8. **There was a different approach to Higher Education Institutions (HEI's), such as universities.** With students being over the age of 18, Higher Education (HE) providers were considered best placed to make decisions for their institutions in line with Public Health England (PHE) guidance. Universities were able to provide remote learning in a way that other settings were not, although it was more difficult for them to 'close' in the same way as other educational settings due to the nature of halls of residence. Many universities provide homes to international students, estranged students and care leavers with nowhere else to go. During the earlier phase of the pandemic, the Cabinet Office coordinated cross-government work on measures and financial support for the sector to stabilise admissions and assist students. Later work focussed on monitoring prevalence amongst young people and ensuring that campuses had outbreak plans, as well as the roll-out of mass student testing to reduce the risk of transmission from students returning to their home towns.

1.7.9. **Protecting vulnerable children and young people, including those in social care, was a focus for the government both before and throughout the pandemic** - with DfE leading the detailed work on safeguarding as the responsible department. From the outset, consideration was given to how decisions on schools would impact the needs of vulnerable children, including the pressures on children's social care and those dependent on free school meals. Throughout the pandemic, the government's position was that vulnerable children needed to be in school for safeguarding reasons. As such, schools were never completely 'closed' (and references to school closures in this statement are shorthand for closures to *most* children). The data relating to vulnerable children and children's social care expanded and improved over time and was integrated into the Dashboard to support decision making, for example the creation of a 'heatmap' displaying Local Authorities of concern and the inclusion of NSPCC calls and child protection referrals. Work to assess and monitor the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable children is detailed further in Sections 10 and 11.

1.7.10. **As the pandemic continued, protecting children's education remained a high priority, particularly those children who were most vulnerable.** After the first lockdown, the Prime Minister was clear that returning children to school was

a moral duty. Closing schools was in future to be seen as the last resort to be used after social and economic restrictions. As the Government's response to the pandemic developed, and was laid out in strategic plans, the protection of education was explicit, for example in the November 2020 Winter Plan and the Spring 2021 Roadmap.

- 1.7.11. **During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government implemented a range of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to limit transmission of the virus in educational settings, such as the use of bubbles, face coverings and testing.** Given the range of impacts these measures had, the COVID-19 Taskforce worked with departments to ensure they were aligned with the strategic response to the pandemic, and advised the Prime Minister as necessary. These measures were introduced alongside broader measures, including hygiene protocols, ventilation improvements, and remote learning when necessary. Decisions were underpinned by the latest advice from SAGE and PHE. The measures were developed with public health advice, reflected the government's commitment to educational outcomes, and were reviewed and adapted in line with emerging evidence and feedback.
- 1.7.12. A key intervention was the introduction of 'bubbles' in schools, which was a form of social distancing for children. This approach grouped pupils and staff into consistent cohorts that did not mix with others within the school setting. The aim was to reduce the number of potential contacts each individual had, limiting the scope of transmission and making contact tracing more manageable in the event of a positive case. Bubbles varied in size depending on the age group and school setting, with smaller groups in primary schools and whole year groups often forming bubbles in secondary schools.
- 1.7.13. The use of face coverings was introduced during periods of high transmission, guided by scientific advice that airborne transmission was a key mode of virus spread, particularly in poorly ventilated spaces. Initially, masks were recommended in corridors and shared spaces, and were later extended to classroom settings for secondary school pupils and staff, especially in areas under stricter local or national restrictions. It was acknowledged that masks caused an obstruction to teaching and learning due to their impact on communication, so they were introduced only during periods of high prevalence of the virus in order to keep children in school, and removed as soon as rates

were lowered. The approach aimed to balance infection control with minimising disruption to learning and wellbeing by keeping children in school.

- 1.7.14. Asymptomatic testing in educational settings was a key part of the Government's mitigation strategy, particularly from early 2021 with the introduction of mass testing in schools, which played a critical role in identifying asymptomatic cases and preventing outbreaks. Regular rapid lateral flow testing was introduced for staff and secondary school students and, while not mandatory, testing was strongly encouraged and backed with public messaging. At key points, such as the return to school in March 2021 after the third national lockdown, mass testing was conducted on-site to minimise the risk of outbreaks which helped to maintain face-to-face education. Home testing kits were later distributed to support early identification of cases. The approach was scaled back as community transmission declined and vaccination coverage increased. Routine school testing was phased out during early 2022, as the approach moved towards managing COVID-19 as an endemic illness as part of the 'Living with Covid-19' strategy.

1.8. This statement is divided into the following sections:

- 1.8.1. Section 2 covers the roles and responsibilities of the Cabinet Office. It provides an overview of the structures, people and processes across government and how they evolved over the course of the pandemic. There was no single department with overarching policy responsibility for children and young people. This section, therefore, details how the Cabinet Office interacted with other key areas of government, such as the DfE and DHSC, as well as public authorities that provide services to children and young people.
- 1.8.2. Section 3 sets out the role and understanding of the Cabinet Office in relation to pre-pandemic planning and preparedness policy, and the early weeks of the COVID-19 response. The Cabinet Office published guidance to support preparedness planning at both the national and local level which included the needs of children and young people during an emergency. The guidance featured school closures as a possible measure to control the transmission of pandemic influenza.
- 1.8.3. Section 4 and subsequent sections up to Section 9 are, in the main, set out chronologically as policy was developed and rolled out during the pandemic.

There are subsections for specific policy issues, which at times takes content out of chronological order.

- 1.8.4. Section 4 provides an account of the Cabinet Office's involvement in education matters in the spring of 2020, specifically the decision to close schools in March 2020 and the key factors that influenced that decision, the development of safeguards for vulnerable children, mitigations for the children of critical/key workers, delivering and monitoring school closures and arrangements for exams and awarding grades.
- 1.8.5. Section 5 sets out the Cabinet Office's involvement in the development of policy related to school reopening and examinations throughout Spring and Summer 2020. Returning children and young people to education was a priority for the Government. To achieve this, the Cabinet Office coordinated work across departments to drive forward (for example) the provision of testing kits and PPE packs, as well as guidance on hand washing, face masks and the management of bubbles. There was a focus on understanding and balancing the impacts on children's wellbeing, their educational attainment, the economy and the spread of the virus. Tiering and arrangements for local lockdowns were designed to protect education and early years provision. As remote education was a key mitigation, access to devices and improving the quality of remote learning was a priority.
- 1.8.6. Section 6 covers the Cabinet Office's involvement in decisions related to the full reopening of schools in Autumn 2020. The vast majority of early years childcare settings, schools and colleges reopened in September 2020 enabled by a range of measures, against a backdrop of rising prevalence of the virus which the Government developed a tiering system to address. The HE sector was subject to a significant focus with rising infections in young people, and mass testing was introduced to mitigate risks around wider transmission. Data relating to vulnerable children continued to be monitored closely and policy was developed to tackle 'unseen harms' / 'hidden crimes'.
- 1.8.7. Section 7 covers the end of the second lockdown and the return to a tiered system of restrictions from 2 December 2020. Policy work focussed on the mass testing of children and young people to enable a staggered return to education. With the emergence of the alpha variant, cases of the virus among children and young people rose throughout December 2020, and in January 2021 the

decision was taken to enter a third national lockdown with educational attendance restrictions across all age groups.

- 1.8.8. Section 8 explains the Cabinet Office's role in the reopening of educational institutions in March 2021, as well as the development of policy relating to local responses, and longer-term work on education recovery, through to the autumn of 2021.
- 1.8.9. Section 9 concerns the emergence of the Omicron variant and the subsequent introduction of Plan B restrictions, where children and young people continued to attend educational institutions enabled by NPIs, including testing and the use of face coverings. This section also covers the development of the Living with Covid strategy, which was published in February 2022.
- 1.8.10. Section 10 outlines the Cabinet Office's involvement in policy concerning vulnerable children and young people, including children's social care, throughout the relevant period. This section should be read in conjunction with sections 4 to 9 given the overlap between decisions concerning schools and decisions concerning vulnerable young people. From the outset, the Government's position was that vulnerable children needed to be in school for safeguarding reasons. The Cabinet Office collected data on vulnerable children and young people to aid decision-making. Policy-making focussed on those dependent on free school meals, educational attainment and the provision of remote education, and addressing the pressures on children's social care. This section also covers the temporary legislation and guidance introduced for children's social care.
- 1.8.11. Section 11 sets out the Cabinet Office's involvement in assessing the impacts of the pandemic on children and young people. This was, for instance, through input from No.10, assessments made by the CTF and the Equality Hub, and the coordination of cross-cutting work with other departments.

## 2. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CABINET OFFICE INCLUDING NO.10

### The general role of the Cabinet Office including No.10

- 2.1. As described in its corporate statements for earlier modules of the Inquiry, the Cabinet Office including No.10 has a unique role at the centre of the UK Government in setting and ensuring delivery of the government's overall policy objectives, including in relation to children and young people - examples of this are captured in advice to the Prime Minister in January 2020 on the approach to reforming children's social care<sup>5</sup> and the overarching strategy to tackle youth offending.<sup>6</sup>
- 2.2. The Cabinet Office has responsibility for "supporting collective government, helping to ensure the effective development, coordination and implementation of policy".<sup>7</sup> A key part of this role is supporting collective decision-making through Cabinet and its committees. As the Cabinet Manual sets out, "Cabinet is the ultimate decision-making body of government. The purpose of Cabinet and its committees is to provide a framework for Ministers to consider and make collective decisions on policy issues...The Cabinet system of government is based on the principle of collective responsibility. All government ministers are bound by the collective decisions of Cabinet, save where it is explicitly set aside, and carry joint responsibility for all the Government's policies and decisions".<sup>8</sup>
- 2.3. Not all Government decisions require collective agreement. The Cabinet Manual does not give definitive criteria for issues which engage collective responsibility, but makes clear that "proposals will require consideration by a Cabinet committee if: the issue is likely to lead to significant public comment or criticism; the subject matter affects more than one department; and/or there is an unresolved conflict between departments". The Cabinet Manual also sets out that "policy proposals with public expenditure implications will not be agreed unless Treasury ministers are content. If necessary, issues can be referred to the Prime Minister or, if he or she so decides, to Cabinet for a decision".

---

<sup>5</sup> JF/009 - INQ000546739: Advice to PM on Children's Social Care

<sup>6</sup> JF/010 - INQ000546838: Note to PM on the Response to Crime, Youth Offending and Violence

<sup>7</sup> JF/011 - INQ00086870: Description of Cabinet Office

<sup>8</sup> JF/012 - INQ000182315: The Cabinet Manual sets out the main laws, rules and conventions affecting the conduct and operation of government. As per pg31, 'collective responsibility' "means that a decision of Cabinet or one of its committees is binding on all members of the Government, regardless of whether they were present when the decision was taken or their personal views. Before a decision is made, ministers are given the opportunity to debate the issue, with a view to reaching an agreed position. It is for the Prime Minister, as chair of Cabinet, or the relevant Cabinet committee chair to summarise what the collective decision is, and this is recorded in the minutes by the Cabinet Secretariat." Collective responsibility "requires that Ministers should be able to express their views frankly in the expectation that they can argue freely in private while maintaining a united front when decisions have been reached. This in turn requires that the privacy of opinions expressed in Cabinet and ministerial committees, including in correspondence, should be maintained."

- 2.4. The Cabinet Office enables collective decisions and provides direct policy and implementation advice to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (CDL)<sup>9</sup> and other Cabinet Office Ministers. It draws on policy advice, expertise, data and analysis from departments with lead responsibility for specific issues, such as the Department for Education (DfE) in respect of education, HM Treasury (HMT) for the economy, and DHSC for public health. The Cabinet Office also has responsibility for “coordinating the Government’s response to crises”<sup>10</sup>, working closely with Lead Government Departments (LGDs).
- 2.5. Cabinet committees ordinarily have an official-level committee which meets ahead of the ministerial meeting to coordinate and review papers, data and advice and prepare briefings. This helps ministerial meetings to run smoothly and enables collective agreement to be reached. For example, COVID-O (Officials) would ordinarily precede the COVID-O meeting of ministers.
- 2.6. Decisions will have continued to have been taken within individual departments when collective decisions were not required. In these instances the role of the Cabinet Office was, as is typical, focused around strategic coordination, ensuring collaboration between the relevant parts of government, assuring progress and providing challenge to help strengthen policy-making and ensure alignment with the Government’s overarching strategic objectives.
- 2.7. The decision as to how and to what extent the Cabinet Office supports or challenges departments is always a matter of judgement. Senior officials and ministers use a range of factors - for example political direction or ministerial priorities - to decide where the department may need to intervene in the work of departments.
- 2.8. As the Government’s website explains, “The Prime Minister is the leader of His Majesty’s Government and is ultimately responsible for the policy and decisions of the Government”.<sup>11</sup> He or she is advised and supported by officials and special advisers (temporary civil servants appointed directly by ministers who can, in addition to other roles, provide political support) based in No.10. Together they help the Prime Minister “to establish and deliver the Government’s overall strategy and policy priorities, and to communicate the Government’s policies to Parliament, the public and international audiences”.
- 2.9. Teams based in No.10 are part of the Cabinet Office. They ordinarily include (but are not limited to) a private office, the ‘PM Post’ team and a press office. The precise configuration of

<sup>9</sup> CDL is a member of the Cabinet. During the relevant period ministerial responsibilities of CDL included: oversight of all Cabinet Office policy; oversight of constitutional policy and enhancement; oversight of Cabinet Office responsibilities on national security and resilience; and supporting coordination of the cross-government and devolution aspects of the response to COVID-19.

<sup>10</sup> JF/011 - INQ000086870: Description of Cabinet Office

<sup>11</sup> See, in particular, JF/005 - INQ000092893: Cabinet Office corporate witness statement of Simon Case for Module 2, paragraphs 2.33-2.38.

teams based in No.10 evolves over time at the discretion of the Prime Minister. During the relevant period, No.10 also housed a policy unit (throughout), a data and science team (from summer 2020) and a delivery unit (from spring 2021). In addition, an interim COVID-19 team was set up in No.10 in March 2020 (and subsequently merged into the CTF). Hereafter, when describing the department's work I will typically refer to the Cabinet Office including No.10 with the shorthand "the Cabinet Office".<sup>12</sup>

*Responsibilities in relation to children and young people in England and the devolved administrations*

2.10. DfE had and continues to have "overall responsibility for setting the policy, accountability and regulatory framework for children's services, including children's social care and safeguarding in relation to children, and education and training including early years, primary and secondary education (including in schools), Further Education, Higher Education and apprenticeships and training".<sup>13</sup> The Secretaries of State for Education during the relevant period were the Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP (July 2019 to September 2021) and the Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP (September 2021-July 2022).

2.11. At the beginning of the relevant period, DfE's responsibilities were:

- 2.11.1. "teaching and learning for children in the early years and in primary schools
- 2.11.2. teaching and learning for young people in secondary schools
- 2.11.3. teaching, learning and training for young people and adults in apprenticeships, traineeships and further education
- 2.11.4. teaching and learning for young people and adults in higher education
- 2.11.5. supporting professionals who work with children, young people and adult learners
- 2.11.6. helping disadvantaged children and young people to achieve more
- 2.11.7. making sure that local services protect and support children".<sup>14</sup>

2.12. The devolved administrations are the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. Ordinarily, legislation provides that certain matters are devolved to the respective legislatures and administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This means that Parliament would not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters except with the agreement of the devolved legislature.

---

<sup>12</sup> JF/013 - INQ000086873: Description of Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street

<sup>13</sup> JF/014 - INQ000146054: Department for Education corporate witness statement of Susan Acland-Hood for Module 2

<sup>14</sup> JF/015 - INQ000546788: Description of Department for Education (Archived on 4 January 2020)

- 2.13. Responsibility for education and training is devolved in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Therefore, each nation sets its own policy and regulations for Early Years, primary and secondary education (including in schools), Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE), apprenticeships and training. This includes decisions about school age, curriculum, qualifications, post-16 pathways, and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
- 2.14. DfE is responsible for children's social care and safeguarding policy in England. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland children's social care and safeguarding is a devolved matter, with each nation setting its own policy and regulations.
- 2.15. In England and Wales, the youth justice system deals with children and young people aged 10-17 who may have committed a crime.<sup>15</sup> The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) has policy responsibility for young offenders, with different courts, secure centres, and sentences in place for young people. Youth Justice plans are held by local authority partnerships, which set out the provision of youth justice services in a given area. This work is coordinated and overseen by the Youth Justice Board, a non-departmental public body sponsored by the MOJ. The Secretaries of State for Justice during the relevant period were The Rt Hon Robert Buckland KC from July 2019 to September 2021, and The Rt Hon Dominic Raab from September 2021 to September 2022.

*Evolution of collective ministerial decision-making meetings in relation to children and young people*

- 2.16. The Inquiry heard in detail about the evolution of ministerial collective decision-making structures during Module 2. A detailed account of this evolution was provided in the corporate witness statement by the former Cabinet Secretary, Simon Case.<sup>16</sup>
- 2.17. Broadly speaking, the way in which children and young people were considered within central collective decision-making fora as they evolved over the pandemic can be summarised as follows:

2.17.1. *The first stage (up to 15 March 2020):* During this stage, the first collective ministerial decisions about the response, as distinct from decisions within the responsibility of a single department, were taken at ministerial COBR meetings.

2.17.2. *The second stage (Mid-March - 27 May 2020):* During the period when the Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs) were in place, education was

---

<sup>15</sup> JF/016 - INQ000546776: CPS description of Youth Crime

<sup>16</sup> JF/005 - INQ000092893: Cabinet Office corporate witness statement of Simon Case for Module 2

predominantly considered in the General Public Services Ministerial Implementation Group (GPSMIG). The MIGs reported into the Prime Minister's 9.15 daily morning meeting which brought together key ministers, officials and advisers to discuss the day's priorities and receive an update on progress.

2.17.3. *The third stage (from 28 May 2020):* Once the MIGs were stood down and replaced by COVID-S and COVID-O, discussion and collective decisions in relation to education took place primarily in COVID-O.

2.18. In January 2021, the National Economic Recovery Taskforce (Public Services) (NERT (PS)) was established to drive the development and delivery of plans to recover public service performance in light of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The NERT (PS), which met for the first time in February 2021 and was chaired by CDL, aimed to use lessons learned from the pandemic response to drive wider reform. This work was led by the Cabinet Office, with support from other relevant senior officials. Education, in particular lost learning, was a regular focus of NERT (PS) meetings,<sup>17</sup> with DfE leading this work and regularly bringing proposals to the NERT (PS) committee for discussion and agreement.<sup>18</sup> NERT (PS) meetings also regularly considered how to support the recovery of Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services, also known as Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CAMHS/CYPMHS).<sup>19</sup> The work of the NERT(PS) committee is described at relevant points throughout this statement.

*Other meetings with the Prime Minister relevant to Module 8*

2.19. Once COVID-O and COVID-S were in operation, in the third stage, the Prime Minister's 9:15 morning meeting evolved into a Dashboard meeting. In this meeting, the Prime Minister, Chancellor, CDL, Health Secretary, and key officials and advisers (including the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA)) would review the latest Dashboard of data, which included school attendance. The frequency of Dashboard meetings was determined by events and developments in the pandemic and the response. Further detail on the Dashboard is provided later in this section of the statement.

2.20. On a regular or ad hoc basis throughout the relevant period, the Prime Minister held meetings for the purposes of in-depth discussion on specific policy and/or operational issues. These

---

<sup>17</sup> For instance JF/017 - INQ000528261: Minute of NERT(PS) meeting on 08.03.21 at which the committee agreed there should be a set of metrics that could be adapted and amended to monitor and measure progress on this issue

<sup>18</sup> For instance JF/018 - INQ000528266: Actions; JF/019 - INQ000528270: Actions; and JF/020 - INQ000528281: Paper. The Cabinet Office has separately disclosed all NERT(PS) papers relevant to Module 8

<sup>19</sup> For instance JF/021 - INQ000528287: Minute of NERT(PS) meeting on 17.06.21

meetings, sometimes referred to as ‘updates’, ‘stocktakes’ or ‘deep dives’ also included key individuals working on the policy area in focus. Some such meetings focused explicitly on issues concerning children and young people, for instance, schools or HE. Other such meetings with a wider thematic focus, such as disproportionately impacted groups or NPIs, also discussed children and young people as appropriate, such as the use and impact of face coverings in schools.

- 2.21. The Prime Minister chaired meetings, sometimes referred to as ‘Quads’, with a small number of Secretaries of State most closely involved in the strategic response. This was to prepare for and align their approach to key strategic decisions in the response to the pandemic. The Chancellor, CDL and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Health Secretary) usually attended and, at times, other ministers were present.

### **Key Cabinet Office bodies and teams**

#### *The Crown Commercial Service*

- 2.22. This section of the statement draws on and repeats sections of the Cabinet Office statements to Modules 1 and 5 of the Inquiry.<sup>20</sup>
- 2.23. The Crown Commercial Service is the UK’s biggest public procurement organisation and an executive agency of the Cabinet Office. Crown Commercial Service works in conjunction with the Government Commercial Function, within the Cabinet Office, to help UK central government departments, arms-length bodies and the wider public sector get better value for money from their purchasing in categories of goods and services where multiple public sector organisations have the same requirement in common.
- 2.24. In the early phase of the pandemic, the Crown Commercial Service helped DfE to organise initial contracts for the provision of vouchers to replace free school meals for children not able to attend education settings, and supported provision of devices to vulnerable children. In this period, short contracts were agreed through existing Crown Commercial Service deals, due to the fast-moving nature of pandemic restrictions in the early period of the pandemic. Following the expiry of these initial contracts, the agreement of new contracts was supported by the Crown Commercial Service through pre-existing procurement frameworks. Further details are provided in Section 4.

#### *Civil Contingencies Secretariat*

---

<sup>20</sup> JF/022 - INQ000106033: Cabinet Office corporate witness statement of Simon Tse, in respect of the Crown Commercial Service, for Module 1; JF/023 - INQ000497031: Module 5, Corporate Witness Statement of Gareth Rhys Williams; JF/024 - INQ000528389: Module 5, Corporate Witness Statement of Claire Gibbs

2.25. The Civil Contingencies Secretariat coordinated the initial response to the pandemic in January to March 2020, including the establishment of the Dashboard, and continued to run COBR meetings, as appropriate, throughout the relevant period.<sup>21</sup> The role of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the initial response to the pandemic is explained in Section 3. The Director of Civil Contingencies Secretariat was Katharine Hammond at the beginning of the relevant period until August 2020. Roger Hargreaves was Director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat from October 2020 to July 2022.

#### Other Cabinet Office Secretariats

2.26. Within the Cabinet Office including No.10, in March 2020, around 20 Directors General and Directors moved from their 'day jobs' to the COVID-19 response. This entailed the temporary repurposing of the Economic and Domestic Secretariat (EDS), large parts of the National Security Secretariat (NSS), the Trade Secretariat, and the Transition Taskforce (which had been set up to prepare for the UK's departure from the EU). These officials set up new teams to advise and support the ministerial meetings.

2.26.1. A dedicated COVID-19 team was established in No.10. Tom Shinner was appointed to lead this team as Director General for COVID-19.

2.26.2. Each MIG was supported by a dedicated team in the Cabinet Office, led by the Senior Secretary for that Committee. Education was predominantly considered in GPSMIG, for which the Senior Secretary was Jessica Glover.

2.26.3. A central COVID-19 Secretariat in the Cabinet Office worked to Jonathan Black and Mark Sweeney, with each providing resilience for the other. This included:

2.26.3.1. A central coordination team which triaged issues that potentially needed Ministerial agreement and discussion, and directed the engagement between the different meetings, working with No.10 staff.

2.26.3.2. A strategy function for the roadmap (once lockdown had been implemented and as attention turned to 'unlocking in phases). Tom Shinner's team also worked on strategy.

2.26.3.3. A data and analysis function.

---

<sup>21</sup> JF/012 - INQ000182315: The Cabinet Manual explains that COBR is "the mechanism for agreeing the central government response to major emergencies which have international, national, or multi-regional impact. Meetings at COBR are in effect Cabinet committee meetings, although there is no fixed membership, and they can meet at ministerial or official level depending on the issue under consideration."

2.26.3.4. A Programme Management Office which commissioned delivery plans and began to track the implementation of measures across government, working alongside Tom Shinner's team.

2.26.3.5. In addition, Philip Barton, Director General, led a Cabinet Office team on long-term planning and the eventual recovery from the pandemic.

#### COVID-19 Taskforce

2.27. In May 2020, a new COVID-19 Taskforce (CTF) was formed and the other COVID-19 teams were ended, so that many staff were able to return to their previous roles. The Taskforce initially reported to Simon Case as the Permanent Secretary at No.10 responsible for COVID-19. Its first incarnation brought together the No.10 team (led by Tom Shinner) and a Cabinet Office team (led by Simon Ridley). The other Cabinet Office Directors General who had supported the COVID-19 response (Jonathan Black, Mark Sweeney and Jessica Glover) returned to versions of their previous roles.

2.28. The CTF was the unit at the centre of government which joined together strategy, analysis and coordination with departments across Whitehall to drive delivery. James Bowler and Simon Ridley provided to Module 2 of the Inquiry a statement describing the establishment and responsibilities of the CTF.<sup>22</sup> Working closely with departments, the CTF worked to guide the attention of the Prime Minister and other ministers to priority issues, and facilitate collective decision-making where appropriate. The CTF played a key role in advising on the Government's overall strategy and helped ensure the decisions taken by the Government in relation to the broader handling of the pandemic were informed by expert advice.

#### Senior leadership

2.29. The CTF coalesced over the summer of 2020. To meet the challenges of developing the Government's ongoing response and enabling the decision making required, the CTF had to bring in resource from around the Government, beginning this process in May and June. Its size, having begun in the tens, reached hundreds within six months.

2.30. After Tom Shinner left in July 2020, Kate Josephs joined the Taskforce to replace him. At this point all the staff in the Taskforce formed a single team in the Cabinet Office, which worked closely with No.10.

---

<sup>22</sup> JF/006 - INQ000248852: Cabinet Office corporate witness statement of James Bowler and Simon Ridley, in respect of the Covid-19 Taskforce

- 2.31. Simon Case was appointed the Cabinet Secretary in September 2020. Simon Ridley and Kate Josephs led the Taskforce until James Bowler was appointed Second Permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office with responsibility for leading the Taskforce from October 2020. Kathy Hall joined the Taskforce in October 2020 ahead of Kate Josephs leaving in December 2020. Rob Harrison joined the Taskforce in October 2020 to lead the analysis and data team and to continue building these capabilities. James Bowler, Kathy Hall, Simon Ridley and Rob Harrison remained the Taskforce senior leadership until July 2021.
- 2.32. Around the time that delivery of the roadmap concluded, James Bowler was appointed as Permanent Secretary to the Department for International Trade with effect from August 2021. Simon Ridley led the Taskforce from this point until March 2022, supported by Kathy Hall (who remained in post until January 2022) and Rob Harrison (who remained in post until February 2022).

#### *The roles of the CTF*

- 2.33. The CTF had 3 main roles:

- 2.33.1. **Strategic leadership and coordination:** the CTF coordinated and advised on strategy for the COVID-19 response, working with HMT, medical and health experts including the CMO and GCSA and other departments to ensure the strategy reflected a wide range of inputs and considerations. This included preparing a number of strategies throughout the pandemic which steered the overarching government response. As part of this role the senior leadership of the CTF met regularly with the Prime Minister and other senior ministers to discuss and develop strategy. The CTF was also the secretariat for the COVID-19 Cabinet Committees: the COVID Strategy Committee (COVID-S) and COVID Operations Committee (COVID-O).
- 2.33.2. **Data and analysis:** the CTF equipped decision makers with a single analytical picture that included the health, economic and social impacts of COVID-19. The CTF's analytical capability comprised thematic teams covering health, science, economics, behavioural insights, social policy and public services, plus long range foresight and data science functions. The CTF worked very closely with analysts across government, and with the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and its subgroups, to reach cross-government consensus and present ministers with the best collective understanding of the evidence, while noting the uncertainties. The Data and analysis team established data flows from departments feeding

the Dashboard (see paragraph 2.42), as well as a range of other data assets (e.g. a daily data brief, interactive forecasting/modelling tools and bespoke data packs).

2.33.3. **Delivery and development of policy:** a very wide range of government departments and other bodies were responsible for developing COVID-19 policy and delivering it on the frontline. From the centre of government, the CTF looked across the response, bringing the range of departmental views together to consider the health, economic and social impacts and help ensure that ministerial decisions were implemented effectively. For much of the relevant period, the CTF had a central Programme Management Office (PMO) which monitored the delivery of projects and programmes across Government that were critical to the Government response. The CTF Field Teams provided thematic and geographic-based research and reporting from across the UK.

2.34. As part of its role in the delivery and development of policy, the CTF had a number of focused teams that worked with other government departments on a range of areas in response to the pandemic. While responsibility for delivery in these areas lay with departments and other relevant bodies, the focused teams in the CTF contributed to policy development and helped ensure that collectively agreed policies were delivered effectively by holding to account the relevant departments. This was an important way in which the CTF helped to ensure that the different components of the COVID-19 response balanced the health, economic and social impacts, and aligned with the wider government strategy.

2.35. Areas covered by these teams changed over time according to the nature of the Government's response. Areas covered for significant periods of the response include the following (listed alphabetically): business and the economy; compliance and enforcement; disproportionately impacted groups; education and wider public services; health and adult social care; local action; regulations; social contact; test, trace and isolate; travel and borders; and, vaccines and therapeutics.

2.36. From December 2020, I was the Director for the team in the CTF focused on education and wider public services (my predecessor was Sean Harford). This team considered the COVID-19 policy measures and guidance for all education settings to limit transmission while mitigating the impact on pupils, students and the delivery of education and childcare. The CTF worked closely with DfE, PHE (later the UKHSA), DHSC and the Deputy Chief Medical Officer (DCMO) in this area. The CTF also worked with relevant departments to develop guidance and measures to limit transmission in wider public services, while mitigating the

impact on delivery of these - for example, by working with DfT on the guidance and measures implemented on public transport services to enable full reopening of schools in June 2020 (see paragraph 5.43-46).

- 2.37. The CTF convened weekly Return to School 'Gold' meetings between September 2020 and January 2021. They were initially chaired by the CTF's Director General (DG), Kate Josephs, and brought together officials from the CTF, No.10, HMT, DfE, DHSC, DfT and PHE (later the UKHSA) to focus specifically on cross-cutting policy issues concerning the return to school and university. Towards the end of January 2021, they were renamed 'Education Gold' and the scope was extended to cover education more broadly. Education Gold meetings were stood down following the publication of the Government's 'Living with COVID-19' strategy on 21 February 2022.
- 2.38. CTF officials attended the Vulnerable Children and Young People Covid Steering Group (VCYP), which was set up and chaired by DfE.<sup>23</sup> Meetings took place between December 2020 and July 2021 and enabled discussion on the delivery of cross-cutting actions concerning vulnerable children and young people, through a strong focus on education and safeguarding
- 2.39. The cross-government Higher Education (HE) Review Steering Group met on five occasions between March and April 2021. Although the review was led by DfE, the CTF maintained oversight through the HE Review Steering Group. Its role was to convene inputs from across government and oversee progress on the return to face-to-face teaching and learning in HE, in line with the Spring 2021 Roadmap, taking into account the data, implications of the options, and proposing mitigations. The Steering Group's standing panel comprised Directors General and Directors from DfE, DHSC, HMT, MCLD, CDMO, PHE, JBC, NHS Test and Trace (NHST&T), and GoScience.
- 2.40. The CTF worked closely with a range of other Cabinet Office teams on matters related to children and young people, including but not limited to the following.
- 2.40.1. The Economic and Domestic Secretariat ('EDS') had responsibility for supporting collective agreement across domestic and economic policy, particularly on matters that were not directly part of the COVID-19 response or had a longer-term focus. The EDS convened meetings between Whitehall departments to resolve disagreements and agree actions, and

---

<sup>23</sup> JF/025 - INQ000546633: Vulnerable Children and Young People Covid Steering Group Terms of Reference

sometimes to co-ordinate policy advice to the Prime Minister on specific issues<sup>24</sup>.

2.40.2. The COVID-19 Communications Hub (Comms Hub) was established in March 2020 to ensure efficient and effective delivery of cross-government public communications in relation to the pandemic. The Comms Hub led the Government's overall public communication strategy, including in relation to education, working closely with DfE and No.10 to shape and strategically align government campaign activity. By way of example, the Comms Hub established a cross-government working group to coordinate messaging and media campaigns targeted at students and young people during Autumn 2020.<sup>25</sup> This work is outlined in Section 6.

2.40.3. The Equality Hub (renamed in October 2024 as the Office for Equality and Opportunity (OEO)), is the unit responsible for cross-government policy on disability, ethnic disparities, gender equality, Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights and the overall framework of equality legislation for the UK (Equality Act 2006 and Equality Act 2010). The work of the Equality Hub is outlined in Section 11.

#### Data, analysis and expert advice

- 2.41. A key part of the Cabinet Office's role in facilitating decision-making during the pandemic was working to ensure that decision-making was supported by relevant data, analysis and expert advice. Many government departments held data relevant to the response and conducted analysis aligned to their departmental interests and responsibilities. SAGE and its sub-groups provided expert scientific advice. The Cabinet Office worked to integrate these various inputs and present a single, integrated picture to support decision-making across government. The structures and processes for collating and reporting data evolved in line with the response during the course of the pandemic.
- 2.42. From 15 March 2020, a COVID-19 Dashboard of relevant data was created, operated initially by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat. The Dashboard provided a range of data available at the time related to COVID-19 including on mortality, infection, health, restrictions and mobility, the economy and the public sector. The range of data focussed on children and young people expanded over time. Data was initially provided by DfE in relation to school attendance,

---

<sup>24</sup> JF/026 - INQ000099517: Cabinet Office corporate witness statement of Alex Chisholm for Module 1

<sup>25</sup> For example JF/027 - INQ000546829: Activity Planning; JF/028 - INQ000546830: Readout

including specific data on vulnerable children. As the pandemic progressed, the data sources widened to include data from Childline and NSPCC. Further details are at paragraph 5.6.

- 2.43. From late summer 2020, the CTF assumed responsibility for the Dashboard, which was used to present regular, often daily, updates to the Prime Minister and others, and to brief Cabinet and other ministerial meetings. This continued until February 2022.
- 2.44. Officials from the CTF worked closely with analysts, data scientists and scientific experts across government, including SAGE and its subgroups, to provide ministers with the best collective understanding of the evidence and to advise on specific issues. The analytical community included, among others: the CTF data and analysis team; SAGE and its subgroups, including the Children's Task and Finish Working Group; CMO and GCSA; the different functions that ultimately formed part of the UKHSA including PHE and the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC); the Office for National Statistics (ONS); HMT; BEIS; and, the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT).
- 2.45. Key official advisers on COVID-19, including but not limited to the GCSA and CMO (and DCMOs where appropriate), were invited routinely to meetings with the Prime Minister and provided input to the vast majority of CTF-drafted papers for ministerial meetings and the Prime Minister. Senior officials in the CTF met regularly with the CMO and GCSA and there were open channels of communication. The CTF also included a Science and Projects team which acted as a central docking point for SAGE, working closely with the SAGE and the SPI-M secretariats to ensure commissioning and inputs aligned with the broader work and its sequencing.
- 2.46. Modelling was part of the suite of data, analysis and expert advice that supported the development of policy and strategic decision making during the pandemic. Modelling of different strategic approaches to TTI was generally undertaken by experts outside of the Cabinet Office and used to help demonstrate the anticipated outcomes of a policy response before decisions were taken. No.10 data scientists and the CTF's Analysis and Data team supported the CTF to ensure that comprehensive and balanced advice, underpinned by a range of data and modelling, was presented to ministers to inform decision-making.
- 2.47. During the pandemic response, the CTF's Analysis and Data team produced 'Spotlight' reports which provided a summary of the latest scientific and expert insight on a specific issue and its implications for policy and strategy making. The majority of reports produced by the Analysis and Data team were not specific to children and young people, although they sometimes identified high-level considerations, risks and impacts. Reports relevant to

children and young people covered, among other issues: transmission in schools;<sup>26</sup> mental health and wellbeing in young people;<sup>27</sup> reopening schools;<sup>28</sup> the impact of COVID-19 on childcare;<sup>29</sup> ventilation inside buildings including classrooms<sup>30</sup>; and, the use and understanding of support and childcare bubbles.<sup>31</sup>

- 2.48. The International Comparators Joint Unit (ICJU) was established in April 2020 as a joint team between (what is now) the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Cabinet Office. Its role was to assess international responses to the pandemic including key countries' public policy decisions and whether similar approaches could be adopted in the UK. Throughout the relevant period, the ICJU produced a number of documents relevant to children and young people internationally, which helped the CTF to understand the trade-offs of different approaches and to learn lessons to inform the development of the UK's strategic approach to policymaking. Examples of ICJU reports are exhibited.<sup>32</sup> A multidisciplinary expert group - the International Best Practice Advisory Group (IBPAG) - worked to quality-assure the ICJU's analysis.
- 2.49. During the vaccine rollout, the CTF produced a regular Vaccines Report<sup>33</sup> which compiled information specific to the uptake of COVID-19 vaccines. This report included a range of data - including the number of vaccines administered and vaccine take-up by children aged between 5-11 years, 11-15 years, 16-17 years and young people aged 18-29 years - across geographical regions. This data helped the Government to monitor the take up of the vaccine among children and young people, supporting wider decision-making in line with the overall strategy for managing the pandemic.

---

<sup>26</sup> JF/029 - INQ000622768: Spotlight - Transmission in schools 26.01.21

<sup>27</sup> JF/030 - INQ000546538: Spotlight - Mental Health and Wellbeing in Young People 04.02.21

<sup>28</sup> JF/031 - INQ000546534: Spotlight - Reopening schools 05.02.21

<sup>29</sup> JF/032 - INQ000546556: Spotlight - The impact of Covid-19 on childcare 18.05.21

<sup>30</sup> JF/033 - INQ000611666: Spotlight - Ventilation (Fresh Air) 20.01.21

<sup>31</sup> JF/034 - INQ000546542: Spotlight - Use and understanding of Support and Childcare Bubbles 02.02.21

<sup>32</sup> JF/035 - INQ000196550: Schools - Update on France, Germany and Denmark 22.6.20; JF/036 - INQ000196570: Education 21.8.20; JF/037 - INQ000196583: School and University Returns 9.10.20

<sup>33</sup> For instance JF/038 - INQ000420979: Vaccine Report:

### 3. PRE-PANDEMIC PLANNING AND THE EARLY WEEKS OF THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

#### Summary

- 3.1. The role of the Cabinet Office in preparing for a pandemic was set out in detail in the corporate statements of Roger Hargreaves for Module 1 of the Inquiry.<sup>34</sup> I repeat and enlarge upon various examples of preparedness work specific to children and young people in this statement to explain the Cabinet Office's role in this work prior to the COVID-19 response.
- 3.2. The Cabinet Office published various pieces of risk agnostic statutory and non-statutory guidance to support preparedness planning for emergencies at both the national and local level. This guidance acknowledged the need to identify and address the needs of vulnerable groups (including children and young people) as part of planning for an emergency. As this section explains, however, the Cabinet Office was not closely involved in the detail of pandemic planning specific to children and young people prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. DHSC and DfE would be better placed to comment on work undertaken in this regard. The Cabinet Office's understanding is that prior to COVID-19 and in line with the 2011 UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy,<sup>35</sup> the potential benefit of prolonged school closures had been recognised but given the 'substantial economic and social consequences' the understanding was that "[s]uch a step would...only be taken in an influenza pandemic with a very high impact...should not be the primary focus of schools' planning".
- 3.3. From January 2020, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat set up the initial response to COVID-19 in line with its standard practice, which included the production of Commonly Recognised Information Picture (CRIP) documents and cross-government situation reports (SitReps) to collate the latest information on the virus and response. The Civil Contingencies Secretariat facilitated cross-government senior officials meetings and COBR meetings. Issues relating to children and young people were covered in these meetings and associated documents, particularly in relation to education and school closures.

#### Risk management and assessment

- 3.4. As the Inquiry explored in earlier modules, risk management responsibilities in the UK Government are based on the Lead Government Department (LGD) model, whereby responsibility for risk preparedness and management sits with individual departments.
- 3.5. The Cabinet Office is responsible for deciding and designating LGDs. An LGD will usually be the department with primary policy responsibility for the risk and expertise for the area

---

<sup>34</sup> JF/001 - INQ000145912, JF/002 - INQ000182612, JF/003 - INQ000195845, JF/004 - INQ000215620: Witness statements of Roger Hargreaves for Module 1

<sup>35</sup> JF/039 - INQ000102974: UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy 2011

impacted by the emergency scenario. LGDs, with support from other departments and bodies, are responsible for national-level risk anticipation, assessment, prevention and mitigation, preparation, and response. Other departments and agencies remain responsible for planning for and managing impacts in their areas of responsibility and act in support of the LGD.

- 3.6. DHSC is the LGD for infectious human diseases and pandemics. In line with the LGD principles, DHSC had and continues to have overall responsibility for putting in place arrangements to mitigate the potential impacts of pandemics, including on children identified as clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV). Relevant to the scope of this module, DfE was and is responsible for managing impacts in relation to, for example, the education sector as well as children's social care and safeguarding.
- 3.7. The Cabinet Office is also responsible for producing the public-facing National Risk Register (NRR) and the classified version, the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA). Both the NRR and NSRA identify and assess the likelihood and impact of the most serious risks facing the UK and its overseas interests, acting as a tool to support emergency planning. The risks in the NSRA are identified and assessed by LGDs, and later tested with non-risk owning stakeholders and experts including Chief Scientific Advisers (CSAs) and the devolved administrations to enable challenge and identify gaps. DHSC is and was responsible for assessing the risks related to infectious human diseases and pandemics.
- 3.8. The assessment of risks in the NRR and NSRA was and is based on a reasonable worst case scenario (RWCS), produced by LGDs in consultation with experts, for example their CSA, other departments and agencies, the intelligence community, industry and sector stakeholders, and external scientific, academic and policy subject experts. The RWCS is neither a prediction of what will happen, nor the most likely scenario, but instead supports risk planning by giving an illustration of the worst manifestation of a risk that can reasonably be expected to occur based on current information and data.
- 3.9. The NSRA and NRR aid risk preparedness activity by identifying and assessing the likelihood and potential impacts of the most serious risks facing the UK and its overseas interests, and the contingency measures that would be required to respond if the risk were to manifest. In the NRR, for instance, local resilience forums were advised to include school closures in their planning in the event of a local emergency, such as a severe weather event or power outage. However, neither the NSRA nor NRR provide an assessment of the Government's preparedness at any given time for employing the contingency measures identified.

- 3.10. The 2019 iteration of the NSRA acknowledged that in a RWCS-level influenza-type disease pandemic: “Public health measures such as school closures, and social distancing may be partially successful in delaying the peak of a pandemic wave, by a few weeks at most, and might reduce the overall size of a pandemic wave. However these measures are disruptive, with known secondary consequences (e.g. closing schools would reduce the availability of healthcare workers) and the limited evidence available suggests that such measures have maximum effect when implemented early and simultaneously.” The RWCS for an influenza-type pandemic in the 2019 NSRA assumed that schools had not been closed. The impact score assessing the impact on education and disruption to schools was rated 5 (the highest level of impact), where it was noted in the NSRA that: “at peak of pandemic, 17-20% staff absence on a national scale for 2-3 weeks means it is possible that there would be multiple school closures due to the lack of available staff. More widespread school closures would be a policy decision and has not been modelled in this scenario”.<sup>36</sup>
- 3.11. The NSRA is not designed to capture every risk, but instead is primarily a tool to inform understanding of the common consequences that the UK could face as a result of emergencies. By preparing for these common consequences, rather than for every individual risk and scenario, the UK is able to be more flexible in responding to emergencies. To support this, National Resilience Planning Assumptions (NRPAs) are produced and included in the NSRA. The NRPAs identify common, generic consequences across the range of risks in the assessment (e.g. the casualties, duration and extent of loss of power) to inform planning; the development of generic, risk agnostic capability building and business continuity planning. The 2019 NRPAs were based on an influenza-type pandemic including 32.8 million excess casualties and 820,000 excess fatalities and assumed disruption to the NHS and education, mental health impacts and public outrage and behaviour change.

#### Cross-cutting guidance

- 3.12. In the years prior to the pandemic, the Cabinet Office prepared and published a range of statutory and non-statutory guidance to support preparedness planning both at the national and local level. A number of these publications contained guidance to support emergency planners in identifying vulnerable and priority groups, including children and young people, as part of their preparedness work. Examples are outlined below:

- 3.12.1. The government's Emergency Preparedness Guidance, first published in 2006 and revised in 2011, sets out in Chapter 5 that local responders

---

<sup>36</sup> JF/040 - INQ000176776: Extract from the 2019 NSRA

should make special provisions in their plans for vulnerable people including children - highlighting those supported by social services.<sup>37</sup>

- 3.12.2. In 2008, the Government provided guidance to support emergency planners and responders to identify people who may be vulnerable in a crisis and develop local action plans accordingly.<sup>38</sup>
- 3.12.3. In 2016, the Cabinet Office published the Human Aspects in Emergency Management guidance which provides local practitioners with advice on planning and coordinating activities to address the human impacts of emergencies.<sup>39</sup> The guidance includes advice on identifying the needs of those impacted and those who may be disproportionately affected by emergencies, noting that particular consideration should be given to groups that may be considered vulnerable. The guidance identifies children and their carers as a potentially vulnerable group that requires consideration and incorporating into plans, stating that "Children and young people have distinct vulnerabilities in emergency and disaster situations, including unique physiological and developmental needs. These will vary depending on a number of factors including age, gender, culture, disability and socioeconomic status. Wherever possible, children and young people should be involved and considered in community needs assessments. Following an emergency, those providing support should aim to involve and empower children in their own recovery as far as possible." On influenza pandemics specifically, the Human Aspects guidance suggests that "consideration of vulnerable groups and individuals within the population is essential to good pandemic flu plans". It also highlights the need for local planning to take into account the additional steps to be taken both in relation to the vaccination of children under 1 years old and community support for children with existing health conditions.

#### Pandemic preparedness

- 3.13. The Cabinet Office supports and helps to coordinate contingency planning work undertaken within LGDs. This ordinarily includes high-level coordination of cross-department work, rather than detailed planning within sectors. This means that the Cabinet Office did not and does

---

<sup>37</sup> JF/041 - INQ000055887: Emergency Preparedness Guidance (Revised 2011), Chapter 5 p.182

<sup>38</sup> JF/042 - INQ000097681: Identifying People who are Vulnerable in a Crisis, Guidance for Emergency Planners and Responders (2008)

<sup>39</sup> JF/043 - INQ000097683: Human Aspects in Emergency Management, Guidance on supporting individuals affected by emergencies (October 2016)

not have close involvement in risk preparedness activity specifically related to children and young people.

- 3.14. As detailed in Roger Hargreaves' statements for Module 1 of the Inquiry, the Cabinet Office was involved in a number of cross-government influenza pandemic preparedness forums and/or work programmes led (or co-chaired) by DHSC in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. While not specifically focused on children and young people, the Cabinet Office was aware at a high level of department-led activity in this area through its involvement in official-level forums such as the Pandemic Flu Readiness Board (PFRB) and DHSC's Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Programme (PIPP) Board, and attendance at other ad hoc meetings.
- 3.15. In 2011, the Government published the UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy.<sup>40</sup> The Strategy recognised school closures as a key element of a pandemic response, noting that modelling demonstrated the benefit of school closures both to protecting children from infection and in reducing population transmission. The 2011 Strategy acknowledged that 'to be effective prolonged closures are required', but that such closures would incur heavy social and economic costs. It specifically pointed to "a disproportionately large effect on health and social care because of the demographic profile of those employed in these sectors" - as employees in those sectors are more likely to be absent from work due to childcare responsibilities. The 2011 Strategy therefore recommended widespread school closures only in the case of an influenza pandemic with a very high impact, and that this should not be the primary focus of schools' planning. Outlined in the 2011 Strategy was a high level approach to the recovery phase, primarily focussed on health care and the economic recovery of services and industry. The strategy contained no specific plan for school reopening, although it acknowledged that further waves of the pandemic emerging created the need for "organisations to regroup and respond".
- 3.16. In October 2016, a cross-government exercise, Exercise Cygnus, was carried out to test the UK's response to a serious influenza pandemic that was close to the UK's worst-case planning scenarios. Exercise Cygnus involved 12 government departments as well as NHS Wales, NHS England (NHSE), Public Health England (PHE), local public services, several prisons, and representatives from the devolved administrations.<sup>41</sup>
- 3.17. As noted in the report, the scenario used for Exercise Cygnus asked participants to assume that government advice was for schools to remain open and that 250 schools (1%) across England had taken the decision to close. For the purpose of the exercise participants were

---

<sup>40</sup> JF/039 - INQ000102974: UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy 2011

<sup>41</sup> JF/044 - INQ000022792: Exercise Cygnus Report

also asked to plan for staff absenteeism levels of ~30-35%, at any one time. The focus based on the scenario was therefore keeping schools open rather than considering national-level closures.

- 3.18. A series of learnings/recommendations were made in light of Exercise Cygnus, one of which (lesson 14) recommended that DfE study the impact of school closures on society and the possibility of keeping schools open, with a focus on safeguarding and managing absenteeism in the workforce by bolstering staffing levels. The Government accepted all of the recommendations from Exercise Cygnus. DfE would be best placed to detail the work undertaken as a result of this recommendation.
- 3.19. In spring 2017, in response to the findings of Exercise Cygnus, the Government established the official-level Pandemic Flu Readiness Board (PFRB). Co-chaired by the Cabinet Office and DHSC, the PFRB acted as a cross-sector pandemic preparedness forum to oversee implementation and deliver the plans and capabilities to manage the wider consequences of pandemic influenza.<sup>42</sup> Issues relating to children and young people were on occasion discussed at the PFRB, including the sector resilience of children's social care<sup>43</sup> and school closures.<sup>44</sup>
- 3.20. In 2018, as part of the PFRB's workstream on departmental sector resilience, relevant government bodies produced statements of preparedness for pandemic flu. The statement provided by DfE in relation to the preparedness of the education sector is exhibited.<sup>45</sup> It explains: "Whilst existing plans may be sufficient to handle staff and pupil absences of up to 35% in most cases, the expected number of school closures (or partial closures) in a flu pandemic are uncertain. Closure numbers could be extensive depending, for example, on the nature of the virus, the extent to which it affects school age children and the decisions made by individual schools to safeguard pupil safety". In respect of assessing preparedness, the statement notes: "it is up to senior managers [in schools and childcare settings] to develop their own [emergency plan]...the Department recommends that they do so". Continuing, DfE's assessment was that: "[w]hilst we do not have a complete picture of the number of establishments that have adequate plans in place, we believe the education sector's preparedness to be good". The note explains that measures used to respond to recent incidents such as floods and extreme weather (e.g. flexible opening times, use of agency staff and minimum class sizes) "have proven successful" and were believed to be "sufficient

---

<sup>42</sup> JF/045 - INQ000020289: Cross Government Pandemic Flu Readiness Board Terms of Reference (Version 1, March 2017)

<sup>43</sup> JF/046 - INQ000006954, JF/047 - INQ000007003: Actions and minutes from PFRB in November 2017

<sup>44</sup> JF/048 - INQ000007241: Minutes of PFRB on 21 February 2018

<sup>45</sup> JF/049 - INQ000007249: Note produced by the DfE, titled Pandemic Flu Sector Resilience Statement of Preparedness for the Education Sector, dated 18 December 2017

to mitigate the expected impacts across the full duration of a flu pandemic". SPI-M also refreshed its modelling in November 2018<sup>46</sup>, setting out their updated view on what actions would be of use. The updated document advised school closures may be beneficial in some circumstances, but that "the impact of any intervention including closing schools depends critically on the mixing between children and adults, as well as the age dependence of any background immunity."

- 3.21. In relation to school closures, the sector preparedness note prepared by DfE explains: "the decision to remain open, partially open, or to close an establishment is an operational one...taken by the Head Teacher/Principal". Continuing, it notes: "DfE has the ability to message schools if required" but not the "power to enforce school closure", explaining that work was underway to explore "Ministers' appetite for having the power to close schools if the impact on school aged children [was] deemed sufficiently serious to warrant it".
- 3.22. Work undertaken as part of the PFRB later informed and underpinned the response to COVID-19 including RWCS planning and the Pandemic Influenza (Emergency) Bill.

#### Draft legislation

- 3.23. As a result of Exercise Cygnus, in 2018, the Pandemic Influenza Bill was drafted under the leadership of the PFRB. The Bill allowed for rapid legislative change to support the continued function of essential sectors in the event of a reasonable worst case influenza pandemic. Education was a key focus of the Bill, with both school closures and regulatory relaxation discussed by the PFRB as possible inclusions. Powers were developed for the Secretary of State for Education (Education Secretary) to close education establishments where there was a need to mitigate the spread of infection, or ensure the health and safety of individuals when there is an increased absenteeism in the workforce.<sup>47</sup>
- 3.24. An Impact Assessment and Equalities Assessment for the Draft Bill were carried out in 2019.<sup>48</sup> The Impact Assessment considered, in the event that educational establishments declined to close, suitable enforcement action for early years provision, maintained schools, academies, independent schools and FE. These predominantly involved financial penalties. The wider impact of school closures on working parents and the economy was recognised, as was the impact on educational attainment - in particular pupils sitting examinations or college age children in residential accommodation. Children receiving free school meals were acknowledged as having the potential to be disproportionately affected. More detailed

<sup>46</sup> JF/050 - INQ000023027: SPI-M Modelling Summary, November 2018

<sup>47</sup> JF/051 - INQ000023118: Pandemic Influenza (Emergency) Bill

<sup>48</sup> JF/052 - INQ000184060: The Draft Pandemic Influenza Bill Summary of Impacts (2019)

preparedness work on mitigations fell under the responsibility of DfE as the LGD for both education and child protection.

- 3.25. In the event, the Pandemic Influenza Bill ultimately formed the basis for the Coronavirus Act 2020 and informed the initial response to the pandemic.

*The emergence of COVID-19*

- 3.26. Throughout January and February 2020, there was significant uncertainty about the nature and spread of the virus. The Cabinet Office continually monitored COVID-19 updates worldwide, with Foreign Office DipTels regularly providing situation updates, which the Cabinet Office reviewed and circulated for awareness to relevant departments.<sup>49</sup> From January 2020,<sup>50</sup> the Civil Contingencies Secretariat created Commonly Recognised Information Picture (CRIP) documents which were viewed at regular COBR meetings. These, along with regular cross-government SitReps (also published by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat) contained information on the worldwide COVID-19 picture, including steps that other countries were taking regarding school closures.
- 3.27. The Director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat chaired the first cross-government senior officials meeting on the emerging coronavirus on 17 January 2020. The Health Secretary chaired the first COBR meeting on 24 January 2020. The note of a cross-government working group call on 28 January 2020, convened by DHSC and attended by (among other departments) DfE, said that a significant amount of work had been done by many government departments to prepare for the flu pandemic RWCS, under the UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy, with consideration being given to elements such as closure of schools (and possibly universities). Departments were asked to consider escalation of a response up to and including the pandemic flu RWCS, and to inform DHSC of any pinch points or areas that may be vulnerable and what could trigger those vulnerabilities.<sup>51</sup>
- 3.28. On 4 February 2020, at a Senior Officials meeting on the novel coronavirus response, DfE noted that work was ongoing on the response plan for education and that a 'closure directive power' for schools was already in the draft Pandemic Flu Bill, though clauses for the devolved administrations were not yet included.<sup>52</sup> An action from this meeting was for the devolved administrations to 'prioritise work on completing their clauses in the Draft Pandemic

---

<sup>49</sup> For instance: JF/053 - INQ000546804: DipTel Summary 28.2.20; JF/054 - INQ000546805 DipTel Tokyo Summary 28.2.20; JF/055 - INQ000546806: DipTel Summary 18.2.20

<sup>50</sup> JF/056 - INQ000056162: CRIP 1 24.1.20

<sup>51</sup> JF/057 - INQ000147377: Note of cross-government working group call 28.01.20

<sup>52</sup> JF/058 - INQ000546808: Minutes, Novel Coronavirus Ad-hoc meeting 04.02.20, p. 6

Flu Bill'.<sup>53</sup> Following this meeting, on 5 February 2020, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat discussed the process for triggering school closures with DfE via email. DfE shared with the Civil Contingencies Secretariat the January Emergency Response Plan<sup>54</sup> developed by the DfE Emergency Response Group, and sought clarification on the decision making process for enacting school closures. The Civil Contingencies Secretariat confirmed the measures would need to be considered and agreed by COBR.<sup>55</sup>

- 3.29. As more information became available about the spread of the virus over February 2020, the Cabinet Office convened a number of COBR meetings at which the impact of the virus on children was discussed. While the direct health risk to children was understood to be low, guidance was commissioned and measures were considered as part of pandemic legislation. Guidance issued to assist the education sector in advising pupils, staff and parents/carers was first published on 19 February 2020<sup>56</sup> and regularly updated over the course of the pandemic to reflect the latest advice.
- 3.30. At a COBR meeting on 5 February 2020, the CMO noted that at that time there had been no recorded cases of children dying from the virus and that it was therefore inferred that children presented with a low risk from the virus.<sup>57</sup>
- 3.31. An action<sup>58</sup> was taken from a Senior Officials meeting on the novel coronavirus response on 11 February 2020 for all departments to provide CCS with responses to a set of 'readiness questions' relating to their sectors. Questions sought to understand: the key decision points and milestones in the run up to the peak of a pandemic; any additional legislative powers/easements required; and any support/equipment required or sector dependencies. Responding to the commission on 14 February 2020,<sup>59</sup> DfE notes that the "key decision at peak of pandemic would focus closure of educational institutions on a more widespread/national scale" and that "current directive closure powers detailed on Coronavirus Bill [were] sufficient". The response noted that "clear and definitive advice" would be needed to support the need for closure of educational settings and that close links with MHCGL would be needed to establish what action was being taken at a local level (i.e. were educational settings taking decisions to close. The response from DfE also noted one decision point would be understanding whether there was "sufficient alternative pupil

---

<sup>53</sup> JF/059 - INQ000546607: Actions, Novel Coronavirus Ad-hoc meeting 04.02.20

<sup>54</sup> JF/060 - INQ000542409: Emergency Response Plan, Coronavirus (January 2020)

<sup>55</sup> JF/061 - INQ000546699: Email chain entitled "School closures - Coronavirus" 05.02.20

<sup>56</sup> JF/062 - INQ000546792: COVID-19: guidance for educational settings (Archived on 25 February 2020)

<sup>57</sup> JF/063 - INQ00056215: Minutes, COBR 05.02.20

<sup>58</sup> JF/064 - INQ000447415: Actions, Senior Officials 11 February 2020

<sup>59</sup> JF/065 - INQ000546700: Email from DfE to CCS, 14 February 2020

provision in other education settings if some schools [had] to close, where surrounding institutions were not” - DfE noted that no additional powers were required in relation to this.<sup>60</sup>

- 3.32. At a COBR meeting on 18 February 2020, chaired by the Health Secretary, the committee considered a CRIP<sup>61</sup> presenting the key scientific advice for a Pandemic Flu RWCS. It showed that 50% of the workforce may require time off at some stage over the course of the pandemic either due to illness or to care for others - this would be higher were schools to be closed. The advice explored strategies on local measures that could delay transmissions, including school closures. COBR agreed that DHSC would lead on the development of policy and draft legislative provisions which could be brought forward in emergency legislation (i.e. a Coronavirus Bill).<sup>62</sup> Advice prepared by the Cabinet Office proposed possible powers to open and close schools, as well as powers to relax staff ratios in early years school and FE. It was agreed at the meeting that the legislation would be developed in consultation with the devolved administrations. In discussion about learnings from a ministerial table-top exercise on 12 February 2020<sup>63</sup>, it was noted that the exercise had highlighted DfE’s dependency on local authorities for action with regards early years and school settings.<sup>64</sup>
- 3.33. While the intention was to keep schools open, by mid-February 2020 school closures were recognised as an intervention that may become necessary. Over the following month the scientific advice on the effectiveness of that intervention was carefully tracked. At a meeting on 25 February 2020, for example, SAGE considered modelling of NPIs that could reduce spread, including school and university closures. As per the minutes from the meeting, it was noted that “[e]vidence from social distancing and school closures implemented in Hong Kong, Wuhan and Singapore indicates that these measures can reduce the COVID-19 reproduction number to approximately 1 (a 50-60% reduction). Reduced spread in the UK through a combination of these measures was assessed to be realistic.” SPI-M was asked to provide further advice for SAGE on measures to contain, delay and adjust the epidemiological peak of the pandemic.<sup>65</sup>
- 3.34. At the COBR meeting on 26 February 2020, the Health Secretary explained that schools were independently taking the decision to close - against advice to the contrary - and that DfE had issued advice to education settings earlier that day. The advice was that schools should not close unless they had a case confirmed by a positive test. In cases where

<sup>60</sup> JF/066 - INQ000546701: DfE response to CCS commission

<sup>61</sup> JF/067 - INQ000052081: CRIP 11, 18.02.20

<sup>62</sup> JF/068 - INQ000546606: COBR Novel Coronavirus Paper - Collective Agreement for COVID19 legislative policy; JF/069 - INQ000087257: Annex A to COVID19 legislative policy paper

<sup>63</sup> Exercise Nimbus was a ministerial table top exercise carried out on 12 February 2020 to work through some of the most difficult decisions that would need to be made by ministers in a RWCS event and to rehearse strategic decision making. See JF/070 - INQ000195891: Minute, Exercise Nimbus 12.02.20

<sup>64</sup> JF/071 - INQ000056227: Minutes, COBR 18.02.20

<sup>65</sup> JF/072 - INQ000174682: Minutes, SAGE 25.02.20

someone in the household was self-isolating, children should still go to school.<sup>66</sup> The Welsh Government had issued updated advice to schools and educational institutions and similar advice had been issued to community-level sporting clubs. The Scottish Government had also issued general advice with the intention that advice would be issued the following day advising against school closure. PHE was commissioned to work with DfE and the Devolved Administrations to update guidance for schools on the risk of COVID-19. DfE was also tasked, with others, to develop advice for international students attending educational establishments in the UK.<sup>67</sup>

- 3.35. On 28 February 2020, following a meeting with the CMO, the Prime Minister was sent a briefing from the Director of Civil Contingencies Secretariat on the UK's preparedness for COVID-19, written in consultation with the CMO and GCSO.<sup>68</sup> The paper outlined what was known about the risks and transmissibility of the virus, pointing out that information on children was sparse, but the numbers of children reported with symptoms was "relatively low".
- 3.36. The briefing acknowledged the potential need for decisions on closing schools in the event of a major escalation and set out the legal powers required to provide the necessary flexibility for schools, such as changing staff ratios. The accompanying CRIP notes the Draft COVID-19 Bill provisions "requiring educational and childcare institutions to close / open / take on additional functions / require staff and students to attend different premises".<sup>69</sup>
- 3.37. The briefing paper was accompanied by an action plan from DHSC - subsequently published on 3 March 2020 - which set out that in the 'delay' phase, 'Action that would be considered could include population distancing strategies (such as school closures, encouraging greater home working, reducing the number of large scale gatherings) to slow the spread of the disease throughout the population, whilst ensuring the country's ability to continue to run as normally as possible. The UK governments' education departments' planning assumptions include the possibility of having to close educational settings in order to reduce the spread of infection'. The action plan also set out national, regional and local structures at a high level, noting DfE's responsibility for children's social care.

---

<sup>66</sup> JF/073 - INQ000056216: Minutes, COBR 26.02.20

<sup>67</sup> JF/074 - INQ000056201: Actions, COBR 26.02.20

<sup>68</sup> JF/075 - INQ000146569: CCS briefing to the PM 28.02.2020

<sup>69</sup> JF/076 - INQ000052225: CRIP 16, 28.02.20

#### 4. THE DECISION TO CLOSE SCHOOLS - MARCH 2020

##### Summary

- 4.1. Up until March 2020, there had been a general consensus both within government, and between the UK government and devolved administrations, that the closure of schools should be avoided. This was broadly in line with the preparedness plans for pandemic flu, which recognised school closures as a potential element of pandemic response with high social and economic impacts.
- 4.2. The case for keeping schools open took into account the scientific advice that the direct health risk to children from COVID-19 was low and the wide range of economic and social impacts that would occur should schools be closed. In the first half of March 2020 there was a growing awareness that schools may need to be closed at a later stage. In mid-March 2020, however, scientific advice showed that closing schools before the Easter holidays could have a positive impact on reducing the rate of transmission. Meanwhile, schools had increasingly been taking the decision to close themselves, and the devolved administrations were pressing for school closures. These were agreed at COBR and announced for the whole UK on 18 March 2020. They took effect from 20 March 2020 until further notice.
- 4.3. The discussions at the key decision making forums in March 2020 demonstrate that active consideration was given to how a decision to close schools would impact on the workforce generally, and in particular, the workforce crucial to the pandemic response and what could be done to mitigate that impact, the impact on students due to take public examinations, the needs of vulnerable children, and the impact on children dependent on the provision of free school meals.
- 4.4. Whilst there was some high-level consideration of remote education and of the social impact of NPIs on children, the focus of central decision making bodies (for which the Cabinet Office provided the secretariats) over the period leading up to the decision to close schools to most children was on *if* and *when* that intervention was required, and *how* in practical terms this would be implemented (i.e. which children should stay in school), rather than detailed work on social and educational impacts and how those could be mitigated. DfE were not, at this early stage, specifically commissioned through ministerial decision-making or the Cabinet Office to work on the ability and readiness of schools to provide education remotely.
- 4.5. The principal driver in the decision to close schools to most children was the impact of schools being open on the transmission of COVID-19 in the community. There were other factors, as identified by DfE - the pressure from schools themselves who were finding it

increasingly difficult to continue as normal as illness and self-isolation impacted on staffing levels and attendance - but the single determinative factor was the change in modelling which demonstrated that further interventions were needed to allow the NHS to cope, and closing schools would have a significant impact and - critically - keep the number of cases below the threshold for breaching ICU capacity.

- 4.6. From the time that the need to close schools was recognised as a possible, and then necessary, intervention, it was also considered necessary that schools would need to remain open for some pupils - namely the children of critical/key workers and vulnerable children. Work in the immediate aftermath of the announcement on 18 March 2020 focussed on how 'critical' or 'key' workers should be defined in the context of school place provision. The key factors underpinning those discussions were: (i) SAGE advised school attendance would need to be under 20% to ensure the reproduction rate of the virus would come down; (ii) the children of key workers needed to be able to attend school to enable their parents to perform their critical roles, and (iii) vulnerable children needed to be in school for safeguarding reasons. Although there was discussion about requiring places to be contingent on having two parents in key worker roles, that was not (initially or ever) implemented in England and Wales. The decision in March 2020 was taken to keep the definition of key workers broad for the purposes of school places and to monitor the position. At this stage there appears to have been no discussion at ministerial level about trying to keep schools open for a wider cohort (e.g. by reference to specific year groups) or what mitigations might make this possible. Those discussions became a significant feature of the discussions about the re-opening of schools - firstly to specific cohorts in June 2020, and then to all eligible pupils from September 2020.

*Consideration of the scientific advice on school closures in early March 2020*

- 4.7. On 2 March 2020, the Prime Minister chaired a COBR meeting on COVID-19 for the first time. The meeting agreed that the Coronavirus Bill be progressed as a priority,<sup>70</sup> and approved DHSC's Coronavirus Action Plan which was published the following day, 3 March 2020. The Action Plan set out 4 phases of the response: "the current emphasis is on the Contain and Research phases, but planning for Delay and Mitigation is already in train". Advice had been provided to first responders, employers, the justice system (including prison and probation services), educational settings, and the adult social care sector. DfE had provided advice about educational settings in England, which could be found on PHE's website, and a DfE helpline was being set up to manage the flow of increasing queries, from providers and from parents of pupils. Within the Delay phase, the Action Plan explained that

---

<sup>70</sup> JF/077 - INQ000056217: Minutes, COBR 02.03.20

“Action that would be considered could include population distancing strategies (such as school closures, encouraging greater home working, reducing the number of large scale gatherings) to slow the spread of the disease throughout the population, whilst ensuring the country’s ability to continue to run as normally as possible. The UK governments’ education departments’ planning assumptions include the possibility of having to close educational settings in order to reduce the spread of infection”.<sup>71</sup>

- 4.8. For the COBR meeting on 4 March 2020 chaired by the Health Secretary, SAGE prepared a paper on the potential impact of behavioural and social interventions on an epidemic of COVID-19 in the UK.<sup>72</sup> This paper included SAGE’s assessment of the potential impact of social-distancing measures on the curve of the (then) epidemic, including school closures. SAGE had “high confidence” that closing schools would be effective at reducing peak hospital demand - with 8-12 weeks of closures - but would have a modest impact on deaths. The assessment recognised that some school provision would be needed to support vulnerable children, stating that “Those in lower socio-economic groups may be most impacted by disruption from school closure, e.g. more reliant on free school meals or unable to rearrange work to provide childcare. Allowing school premises to remain open to provide some community services, while sending most children home, may mitigate this.” (Of the contemporaneous documents that have been located, this is the earliest that contemplates ongoing school provision for vulnerable children). The COBR minutes show that analysis work had focussed on the economic impact of the measures, but that work was also being undertaken to look at the social impacts.<sup>73</sup> DfE was working on plans on how to close schools, including early years and FE. The need to understand parental behaviour and implications for young carers was noted as important. An action for the Cabinet Office was to ensure that the analysis of social distancing measures took into account social and economic impacts.
- 4.9. At a meeting with officials on 5 March 2020, the first part of which was chaired by the Prime Minister, the CMO’s view was that “the prohibition of mass gatherings was not considered necessary from a scientific standpoint, and that widespread school closures were not yet necessary in the current phase of the outbreak.”<sup>74</sup>
- 4.10. At a COBR meeting on 9 March 2020 (by which stage the SAGE advice was to move from the contain phase to the delay phase), again chaired by the Prime Minister, the CMO and GCSA set out the following measures: “self isolation of symptomatic individuals”; “full

---

<sup>71</sup> JF/078 - INQ000056154: DHSC Coronavirus: Action Plan 03.02.20

<sup>72</sup> JF/079 - INQ000056158: SAGE Paper - Potential impact of behavioural and social interventions on an epidemic of Covid-19 in the UK 04.03.2020

<sup>73</sup> JF/080 - INQ000056218: Minutes, COBR 04.03.20

<sup>74</sup> JF/081 - INQ000183959: COVID-19 (O) Officials 05.03.2020

house-hold isolation where one individual is symptomatic”; and “a series of currently undetermined measures to safeguard the elderly and vulnerable individuals”. Accompanying advice prepared by the Cabinet Secretariat<sup>75</sup> set out that these measures:

- 4.10.1. Could cause the closure of early years provision, which would require healthy parents to stay home to provide childcare and risks provider collapse in a fragile market.
  - 4.10.2. 10-15% could miss spring/summer exams in England. Exams in Scotland begin 2 weeks before England. Potential school closures or increased class sizes due to absences.
  - 4.10.3. Safeguarding risks for vulnerable cohorts with pressure on children’s social care and alternative provision.
  - 4.10.4. Other social and practical effects such as loss of earnings for self-employed and zero-hours workers, with further additional costs relating to children (specifically free school meals<sup>76</sup>) under whole household isolation.
- 4.11. The advice set out that SAGE was not advising immediate consideration be given to closing schools but that this may be ‘appropriate for a later stage’. It would be expected to cause ‘No more than 3 weeks delay to peak and possibly much less’, and have a limited effect on peak hospital demand and a modest impact on deaths. In the discussion, the point was made that ‘The possibility of virtual distance learning if school closures were actioned should be considered’. The CMO explained that “school closures were not as effective as other presented measures and would come later if necessary”.<sup>77</sup>
- 4.12. At Cabinet on 11 March 2020, it was noted that there was no scientific consensus on how to deal with the outbreak, and that evidence from other countries should also be considered. The policy remained to keep schools open, but it was recognised that it might be difficult for schools to reopen after the Easter holidays if many teachers became ill. The intervention of closing schools, however, would only be deployed when the time was right.<sup>78</sup>
- 4.13. A COBR meeting later on 11 March 2020, chaired by the Health Secretary, was primarily concerned with the Coronavirus Bill. DfE’s Minister for School Standards noted that DfE had compiled some advice on school trips, and was keen to work with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the advice. The Minister added that exams may fall in a peak

---

<sup>75</sup> JF/082 - INQ000056179: Cabinet Secretariat Advice to COBR

<sup>76</sup> DfE became concerned about the impact of requiring symptomatic individuals and households to stay at home on their access to free school meals. Advice was provided to COBR on 12 March 2020: JF/083 - INQ000056209

<sup>77</sup> JF/084 - INQ000056219: Minutes, COBR 9.3.20

<sup>78</sup> JF/085 - INQ000056132: Minutes, Cabinet 11.3.20

period, and therefore further decisions on these would have to be made at a later stage.<sup>79</sup> Later the same day, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic.

- 4.14. A COBR meeting on 12 March 2020 agreed that (among other measures) guidance on self-isolation of symptomatic individuals, and the cancellation of international school trips, would be announced that day. Household isolation (where one individual was symptomatic) was to be revisited the following week. The Cabinet Secretariat's paper for this COBR meeting had also recommended that ministers discuss the approach to school closures, despite the fact that they were not recommended by SAGE at that time.<sup>80</sup> In the meeting, the GCSA noted that "There was some evidence that school closures may work later in the epidemic. However, this policy would have to be done for 13 - 16 weeks and the effect would likely be less than presented in the paper as the modelling assumed that, following closure, children wouldn't continue to meet within groups which would likely not be the reality". In discussion it was noted that school closures would have a direct impact on the NHS workforce, and would put pressure on parents if they were unable to ask for help from grandparents. The decision was made that no school closures were to be implemented.<sup>81</sup>
- 4.15. From 16 March 2020, the volume and scale of decisions that needed to be taken within a whole-of-government response to COVID-19 demanded a bespoke governance architecture, which became the principal way by which decisions were made, alongside COBR meetings and Cabinet. New Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs) led the Government's key lines of operation (see paragraph 2.17.2). Cross-government work on children and young people was considered primarily through the General Public Sector MIG (GPSMIG), chaired by CDL.<sup>82</sup> The MIGs reported into a 9.15 strategy meeting chaired by the Prime Minister.
- 4.16. The Prime Minister chaired COBR on 16 March 2020, where further interventions were agreed including whole-household self-isolation if one individual was symptomatic (this decision had been prefaced the previous week, as set out in paragraph 4.9) and social distancing measures. In discussion at this meeting, the point had been made that 'the most vulnerable children were often safest at school' and that 'school closures in the UK would put a huge strain on the NHS, supply chains and the food network, and would compromise the resilience of the frontline network'. DHSC and DfE were asked to explore immediately with the devolved administrations what measures could be taken in educational settings short of closure to reassure and align with wider measures.<sup>83</sup> The new restrictions agreed at the

---

<sup>79</sup> JF/086 - INQ000056220: Minutes, COBR 11.3.20

<sup>80</sup> JF/083 - INQ000056209: Cabinet Secretariat Paper 12.3.20

<sup>81</sup> JF/087 - INQ000056221: Minutes, COBR 12.3.20

<sup>82</sup> The other MIGs were the Health Ministerial Implementation Group, the Economic and Business Response Ministerial Implementation Group, and the International Ministerial Implementation Group

<sup>83</sup> JF/088 - INQ000056210: Minutes, COBR 16.3.20

meeting were announced at a press conference that day, where the Prime Minister explained that “now is the time for everyone to stop non-essential contact with others and to stop all unnecessary travel”.<sup>84</sup>

- 4.17. A SAGE meeting also took place on 16 March 2020. Its minutes record that ‘While SAGE’s view remains that school closures constitutes one of the less effective single measures to reduce the epidemic peak, it may nevertheless become necessary to introduce school closures in order to push demand for critical care below NHS capacity. However school closures could increase the risks of transmission at smaller gatherings and for more vulnerable groups as well as impacting on key workers including NHS staff. As such it was agreed that further analysis and modelling of potential school closures was required (demand or supply, and effects on spread)’.<sup>85</sup>
- 4.18. At Cabinet on 17 March 2020, the point was made in discussion that ‘keeping schools across the UK open was an increasing challenge. DfE was working with the sector and Unions to try to achieve consensus. Schools would increasingly become a secure space for children rather than full educational establishments. Decisions about exams would be needed soon. With every measure to help reduce the spread of the virus more widely, pressure was ratcheted up on schools. Teachers should see their roles in the coronavirus response as more like doctors and nurses. It would be an enormous problem for schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland if Scotland closed its schools. The Scottish First Minister had requested further information on the justification for keeping schools open, and requested that this be made public. She may decide to close schools out of step with the wider UK response. Easter holidays may have to start earlier’.<sup>86</sup> It was also noted that ‘as schools closed action would be required on free school meals. Funds and facilities would be needed to feed children likely to be in need’. In respect of the justice system, court proceedings related to children in care had been prioritised while criminal cases with non-custodial sentences had been de-prioritised.
- 4.19. Later on 17 March 2020, the Cabinet Office received advice from the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling, Operational sub-group (SPI-M-O), a sub-group of SAGE that gave expert advice to the UK government on COVID-19 based on infectious disease modelling and epidemiology. The report entitled “SPI-M-O: Consensus view on the impact of school closures on Covid-19” outlined the likely impact of school closures on transmission and the number of severe cases (SPI-M-O had provided similar reports on the 10 February and 19 February). The report warned that NHS critical care capacity was likely or highly likely

---

<sup>84</sup> JF/089 - **INQ00054291** Prime Minister’s statement on Coronavirus (Covid-19), 16.03.20

<sup>85</sup> JF/090 - INQ000546578: Minutes, SAGE 16.03.20

<sup>86</sup> JF/091 - INQ000056135: Minutes, Cabinet 17.3.20

to be breached in the short to medium term, and while there was still uncertainty on the size of the impact of school closures, they would be almost certain to reduce both the epidemic peak and expected number of cases. There was expected to be a lag of around 3 to 4 weeks between the introduction of school closures and the impact being seen on critical care capacity. The report noted that school closures would need to last several months to maintain the effect seen.<sup>87</sup>

4.20. The Cabinet Secretary chaired an officials meeting at 18:30 on 17 March 2020.<sup>88</sup> This included a substantive discussion on schools and DfE was commissioned, for the first time, to provide advice to the Prime Minister outlining the options on closing schools for discussion the next day.

4.21. At a 9.15 C-19 Strategy meeting on 18 March 2020,<sup>89</sup> DfE presented the requested paper on options for reducing school provision.<sup>90</sup> It recommended that schools in England be closed to all except vulnerable children and children of critical workers, with options to take this step after the Easter holidays, or to start to transition from Monday 23 March to the reduced provision. The paper identified several matters for consideration that would arise if schools were closed, namely exams, free school meals, remote learning and teacher training. It noted that DfE intended to publish guidance on the steps that schools should be taking to prepare to teach remotely, that there was not an existing national delivery chain and that existing e-learning platforms were highly variable, as was access to e-learning at home. The minutes noted that DfE was working with the BBC, online providers and publishers to develop options but these would fall short of the learning that would normally be delivered. At this meeting it was agreed that the date for school closures should be set at 23 March, and that a COBR meeting would be held later that day to agree the proposals, and whether to announce the closures that evening. DfE were asked to work to articulate the policy proposal on schools, as well as a plan for delivering it, in time for COBR to review that afternoon. The Cabinet Secretariat were to take forward the work on the definition of key workers.<sup>91</sup>

4.22. At a COBR meeting later that day, attended by both UK government ministers and the devolved administrations,<sup>92</sup> DfE and the Cabinet Secretariat presented slides which recommended COBR agree to announcing all schools would close from the following Monday to all students except the vulnerable and the children of key workers. It was expected that nurseries, private schools, sixth form colleges and FE colleges would do the

---

<sup>87</sup> JF/092 - **INQ000075448** SPI-M-O Paper: Consensus view on the impact of school closures on Covid-19

<sup>88</sup> JF/093 - INQ000546577: Actions, Cabinet Secretary Officials Meeting, 17.03.20

<sup>89</sup> JF/094 - INQ000056261: Minutes, C-19 Strategy Meeting 18.03.20

<sup>90</sup> JF/095 - INQ000107248: DfE Paper on Reducing Schools Provision 18.3.20

<sup>91</sup> JF/096 - INQ000056123: Actions, C-19 Strategy Meeting 18.03.20

<sup>92</sup> JF/097 - INQ000056211: Minutes, COBR 18.3.20

same. The recommendation was that residential schools were to stay open as normal (in light of the needs of many or all of the children who attend those schools), and schools were to be encouraged to stay open for children of key workers through the Easter holidays. Universities and other bodies with students aged over 18 were trusted to make the right decisions for them. COBR was also asked to agree that:

4.22.1. exams and assessments would not go ahead. The Government was to work with the sector and provide more details shortly. The rationale was that Headteachers, union leaders and parents were urging Government to provide advice on exams as soon as possible. The key exam season was to fall between May and June, likely to be at the height of the outbreak.

4.22.2. Government would give schools the flexibility to deliver meals or provide shop vouchers to the 1.3million children eligible for free school meals.<sup>93</sup> It was considered essential for government to continue to make some provision if schools close to many, as for many children this was their only proper meal of the day.

4.23. In the discussion the GCSA advised that school closures could potentially reduce the number of COVID-19 cases by 10-15% and below the threshold for breaching ICU capacity. The importance of consistency of approach was recognised and reflected in the fact that the closure of schools to most pupils took effect across the Four Nations at the same time. The COBR meeting agreed that Easter holidays would be brought forward for all schools in England, simultaneously with Northern Ireland and in line with Scotland and Wales.

4.24. This had the effect of closing all schools from the evening of Friday 20 March 2020 save for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. The announcement made clear that 'Vulnerable children include those who have a social worker and those with Education, Health and Care Plans – a legal document that describes a child's special educational needs and the support they require. Children who do not fall into these groups should remain at home with appropriate care'.<sup>94</sup>

4.25. DfE and the Cabinet Secretariat had also jointly recommended on 18 March 2020 that exams should not go ahead in England, and COBR agreed. The decision was taken simultaneously with the decision to announce closure of schools, because of the imperative to provide clarity on this key issue for schools, unions and pupils, and in circumstances

---

<sup>93</sup> JF/098 - INQ000056188: DfE / Cabinet Secretariat Paper 18.03.20

<sup>94</sup> JF/099 -  Press release on closure of schools, colleges and early settings 18.03.20

where the exam season (in May or June) was likely to fall at the height of the outbreak of the virus.

- 4.26. Later on 18 March 2020, following the COBR decision, the Education Secretary made an oral statement to Parliament announcing the closures. He confirmed “that we will not go ahead with assessments or exams, and that we will not be publishing performance tables for this academic year. We will work with the sector and Ofqual to ensure that children get the qualifications that they need”.<sup>95</sup>

*Delivering and monitoring education closures*

- 4.27. At a GPSMIG meeting on 19 March 2020, chaired by CDL and attended by ministers across government and officials from No.10, Cabinet Office and DfE, there was discussion about the definition of key workers, recognising the advice of SAGE to reduce the number of children in school below 20%.<sup>96</sup> There was discussion about the appropriate definition of a ‘key worker’ and whether schools would be able to accommodate 20% attendance given the number that had already closed because of lack of teachers. Summing up the meeting, CDL noted that the 20% figure was an ideal for nationwide coverage rather than a quota per school, although headteachers should be mindful of the figure. He noted that there was evidence from other countries that some children would stay at home but others would continue to socialise. CDL asked DfE to agree with No.10 the final guidance document on continued schools provision and key workers. The definition of critical worker was to be broad and kept under review, and children should be able to attend where at least one parent met the definition. The matter was to return to the GPSMIG if necessary.
- 4.28. Following the GPSMIG the secretariat commissioned work from DfE for discussion at the next GPSMIG on arrangements for delivery of free school meals and set out what would be on the agenda for that meeting, which at that stage included implementing the policy on cancelling exams. DfE explained in response that more time would be needed to provide a meaningful update on exams.
- 4.29. DHSC prepared a draft paper for discussion at the 9:15 C-19 Strategy Group on 22 March 2020, “COVID-19 response - health & social care: 3 month battleplan to tackle the virus and protect life”<sup>97</sup>. The paper included (p.14) an assessment of the social distancing measures that had been announced or were planned, based on data previously shared with COBR. In this paper, school closures were assessed to confer a maximum 3-week delay to the peak, a

---

<sup>95</sup> JF/100 - INQ000507094: SoSE speech to the Commons on Education Settings, 18.03.20

<sup>96</sup> JF/101 - INQ000056038, Minutes, GPSMIG 19.03.20

<sup>97</sup> JF/102 - INQ000056110: DHSC Paper; JF/103 - INQ000056090: Annotated Agenda

circa 10 to 20% reduction in the peak, and a modest, that is less than 5%, reduction in cases and deaths.

- 4.30. The 9:15 C-19 Strategy Group met on 23 March 2020 following the closure of schools commencing the previous Friday. Three options were to be discussed at the GPSMIG in order to tighten the number of pupils still in schools. These included asking children over a certain age to stay at home, allowing school access only to children where both parents were key workers, or restricting the definition of a key worker. The second of these was noted as having potentially a significant effect, but that communications in that respect would be difficult if the children of medical workers were no longer permitted to attend school.<sup>98</sup> An action from that meeting was for GPSMIG to review the pupil population following the implementation of the schools policy that week.<sup>99</sup>
- 4.31. The Dashboard circulated on 23 March 2020 noted that DfE had switched from monitoring school closure to monitoring the number of schools and other settings that were being retained open for eligible children. DfE was also to report on school meal provision, teaching provision and staffing ratios. The Dashboard also noted that the intelligence was that all HE providers in England had moved or were moving to teaching online with student accommodations and support functions remaining open. There were no reported closures of main HE settings and universities.<sup>100</sup>
- 4.32. GPSMIG met on 24 March 2020 and discussed school provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children<sup>101</sup>, including free school meals. DfE presented proposals for a national voucher scheme for free school meals, utilising an existing Crown Commercial Service contract to support delivery.<sup>102</sup> DfE had contacted the Crown Commercial Service on 16 March to enquire about utilising the contract, following a presentation to No.10 on 13 March 2020. The committee agreed to move forward with the proposed approach<sup>103</sup> and asked DfE to work with HMT and HMRC to explore an uplift to the child benefit system as an alternative route. DCMS were also asked to speak to social media platforms to ensure vulnerable children were safeguarded online; the Home Office and DfE were asked to work on safeguarding vulnerable children from increased risks of exploitation and abuse at home, and to update the group in the week commencing 30 March 2020; DfE was asked to update the group on school provision and free school meals in the same week, and to keep guidance on school provision for children of critical workers under review. On 28 March

---

<sup>98</sup> JF/104 - INQ000056264: Minutes, C-19 Strategy Meeting 23.03.20

<sup>99</sup> JF/105 - INQ000056096: Actions and Decisions, C-19 Strategy Meeting 23.03.20

<sup>100</sup> JF/106 - INQ000120846: C-19 Dashboard 11, 23.03.20

<sup>101</sup> JF/107 - INQ000056009: DfE Paper on Provision for the children of critical workers and vulnerable 24.03.20

<sup>102</sup> JF/108 - INQ000056010: DfE Paper on Free School Meals 24.03.20

<sup>103</sup> JF/109 - INQ000056008: Actions and Decisions, GPSMIG 24.03.20

2020, DfE awarded a contract on free school meals vouchers, and £1 million of vouchers were accepted in the first week of the scheme.<sup>104</sup>

- 4.33. DfE provided a paper for GPSMIG on 1 April 2020, entitled ‘Provision in schools over Easter’, in which it set out its plans to enable the continued attendance at school of vulnerable and critical workers’ children throughout the Easter holidays.<sup>105</sup> DfE reported that it had been liaising with the devolved administrations and that ongoing work with teaching unions and academy trust bodies was required to secure their buy-in to the proposal. The paper discussed DfE’s expectations and monitoring of attendance rates as well as consequential matters relating to free school meals and staffing. An action from the meeting was for DfE to review and revise where necessary the guidance for social distancing to ensure as many vulnerable children as possible were attending school within agreed capacity.<sup>106</sup> Paragraph 10.7 provides further details about the consideration given to children in care at this meeting.
- 4.34. During discussion at an HMIG meeting on 7 April 2020 about the health impacts of social distancing, it was noted that school attendance for vulnerable children was low to date and was a matter of concern. Modelling had been undertaken on the basis that it was possible to have up to 20% of pupils in school with only a very small impact on the spread of the virus.<sup>107</sup> The Dashboard for 6 April 2020 recorded that school attendance was well below the “safe maximum” with only 1.17% of UK pupils attending school the previous Friday, 3 April 2020.<sup>108</sup> In the context of the discussion on the health impacts of social distancing, the DCMO explained it was too early to make adjustments to social distancing measures because there would not be reliable evidence until mid-April 2020, so consideration of health impacts had used the best evidence available to date. The DCMO further noted that one of the missing key components required for modelling was clarity on the role of children in transmission, which would affect decisions on re-opening schools<sup>109</sup>. The C-19 Secretariat was asked to table a further discussion on the health impacts of social distancing once improved data became available, and NHS Digital and DHSC were asked to share with DfE the number of people under 18 years old who were in the 1.285 million people identified as clinically vulnerable (CV)<sup>110</sup>.

---

<sup>104</sup> JF/110 - INQ000546668: Submission to Lord Agnew on Crown Commercial Service’s role managing the impact of C-19 from the wider public sector and in responding to supplier offers, 06.04.20

<sup>105</sup> JF/111 - INQ000083359: DfE Paper on Provision in schools over Easter 31.03.20

<sup>106</sup> JF/112 - INQ000083356: Actions and Decisions, GPSMIG 01.04.20

<sup>107</sup> JF/113 - INQ000083702: Minutes, HMIG 07.04.20

<sup>108</sup> JF/114 - INQ000083692: C-19 Digital Dashboard 06.04.20

<sup>109</sup> See also JF/115 - INQ000083633: SPI-M Draft Paper 01.04.20 provided for HMIG on 07.4.20 (which noted that: (a) restricting school and work contacts substantially reduced R, but relative importance of schools was very sensitive to assumptions about susceptibility and infectivity of children; and (b) more needed to be learned about the role of children in transmission)

<sup>110</sup> JF/116 - INQ000083694: Actions, HMIG 07.04.20

- 4.35. School provision was discussed at GPSMIG on 7 April 2020, with DfE presenting analysis of the latest data on the number of schools which were open and the level of pupil attendance.<sup>111</sup> Current data showed that only 6% of vulnerable children were attending school which did not fully meet the policy objective of keeping them safe from harm. DfE asked ministers to communicate clearly that it was safe for children of critical workers and vulnerable children to attend schools, early years settings and colleges. Actions from the meeting included DfE sharing data on the reasons for low attendance at school and a plan for improving data collection to fill gaps in understanding. It was also to develop updated guidance for schools and parents to encourage increased attendance by vulnerable children and those of critical workers.<sup>112</sup>
- 4.36. The Economic and Business Response Ministerial Implementation Group (EBRMIG) also met on 7 April 2020<sup>113</sup>. Advice from the C-19 Secretariat reiterated the concerns regarding low attendance at schools in respect of the vulnerable children and children of critical workers cohorts, and highlighted some of the sector feedback that may be contributing to those issues<sup>114</sup>. Those concerns were considered by the Government Communications Service in its paper on Business Communication Strategy, which summarised the current and planned departmental engagement with stakeholders in the education sector<sup>115</sup>.
- 4.37. At a 9:15 C-19 Strategy Group on 8 April 2020, the Health Secretary stated that there was no intention to change policy around schools at that time.<sup>116</sup> The Cabinet Secretariat's advice reflected on the wider set of social distancing measures, including an estimate from the Education Endowment Foundation that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers would increase by 1 to 3 months for every 10 weeks of school closures. Given this and the range of other negative consequences, social distancing measures could not be sustained indefinitely and there would be some complex decisions to take about how the measures could be varied safely while ameliorating some of the wider societal effects.<sup>117</sup> The Cabinet Secretariat provided a further version of this paper to the 9 April 2020 COBR meeting. It recorded that only 1.5% of pupils remained in school. In England, only 4% of vulnerable children were in school.<sup>118</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> JF/117 - INQ000267986: DfE Paper on school provision 06.04.20

<sup>112</sup> JF/118 - INQ000083392: Actions, GPSMIG 07.04.20

<sup>113</sup> JF/119 - INQ000083310: Agenda, EBRMIG 07.04.20; JF/120 - INQ000083307: Chair's Brief, EBRMIG 07.04.20

<sup>114</sup> JF/121 - INQ000083313: Annex A to Secretariat Paper on business response to government guidelines on social distancing 07.04.20

<sup>115</sup> JF/122 - INQ000083314: GCS Paper on business communication strategy 07.04.20

<sup>116</sup> JF/123 - INQ000088610: Minutes, C-19 Strategy Meeting 08.04.20

<sup>117</sup> JF/124 - INQ000088354: Cabinet Secretariat Paper on social distancing 08.04.20

<sup>118</sup> JF/125 - INQ000083787: Cabinet Secretariat Paper on social distancing 09.04.20

- 4.38. SAGE met on 14 April 2020 and concluded that “Previous SAGE advice on school occupancy remains unaltered”.<sup>119</sup>
- 4.39. On 15 April 2020, HMIG returned to the subject of the health impacts of social distancing, discussing, among other things, social distancing measures in respect of vulnerable children. It was noted that an update was needed from NHS Digital and DHSC in respect of the number of people under the age of 18 who were among the 1.285 million people identified as CV. Following a commission at the 7 April HMIG, DHSC provided a paper on “Health Impacts of Social Distancing” showing that 16% of 18 to 24 year olds who were accustomed to regular social contact were concerned about being lonely.<sup>120</sup> At the meeting it was noted that school attendance remained lower than the modelled 20%. The committee considered that after Easter there should be a reset in policy approach to encourage more vulnerable children to attend school to better support them.<sup>121</sup> DHSC were tasked with continuing their work to understand the non-Covid health impacts of social distancing to include mental health for all ages, including children.<sup>122</sup>
- 4.40. Support for the HE sector was discussed at a GPSMIG meeting on 16 April 2020. DfE provided the exhibited paper to support discussion: “Stabilising the Higher Education Sector”.<sup>123</sup> Actions from that meeting were for DfE to work with HMT, BEIS and with the devolved administrations to agree measures to stabilise the HE admissions process and generally the HE sector through the crisis.<sup>124</sup>
- 4.41. During the Easter holidays and into the start of the summer term there was a greater focus in the core decision making forums on understanding what the impact of social distancing and not attending school would be on the health, mental health and socialisation of children generally, and also specifically vulnerable children. In the early stages this was against a backdrop of extremely low attendance at school (both during the Easter holidays and into the start of the summer term). Although schools remained open for vulnerable children and children of key workers, attendance was far below the 20% level that had been identified as a safe maximum. The concerns about low attendance were essentially twofold: the very small proportion of vulnerable children in school meant there was little visibility of this group and the low number of children in school may prevent key workers from working.

---

<sup>119</sup> JF/126 - INQ000061533: Minutes, SAGE 25, 14.04.20

<sup>120</sup> JF/127 - INQ000083650: DHSC Paper on health impacts of social distancing 15.04.20

<sup>121</sup> JF/128 - INQ000083706: Minutes, HMIG 15.04.20

<sup>122</sup> JF/129 - INQ000083695: Actions and Decisions, HMIG 15.04.20

<sup>123</sup> JF/130 - INQ000083451: DfE Paper on Stabilising the Higher Education Sector 15.04.20

<sup>124</sup> JF/131 - INQ000083593: Actions, GPSMIG 16.04.20

4.42. At the end of April 2020, the Cabinet Office Secretariat considered the impact of school closures as part of a wider review of the impact of social distancing measures in a paper<sup>125</sup> discussed by ministers at a Quad meeting on 6 May 2020.<sup>126</sup> At the same meeting, ministers were provided with the Cabinet Office's Equality Analysis of social distancing measures which included a section on schools closures, identifying the differential impacts on children with different protected characteristics and circumstances more generally.<sup>127</sup> The key documents read together identify the following impacts in particular:

- 4.42.1. School closures impacted the safety of vulnerable children because school attendance reduced the opportunity for harm to be inflicted, and teachers had less visibility and so were less able to report harm. Dramatic decreases in the number of reports to social care and police were noted.
- 4.42.2. School closures widened the achievement gap between children in the most deprived schools and those in the more affluent schools. It was predicted that school closures until September 2020 could increase the gap by 25-75%, although DfE's initiatives may limit this rise. There were very significant disparities between the online provision of private schools, schools in affluent areas and deprived schools. DfE estimated that the lifetime productivity cost of the attainment gap was £3bn-£9bn per week of school closures. There was a correlation between ethnicity, disadvantage and attainment - almost 50% of children from ethnic minority backgrounds grew up in low income households, compared to just over 20% of white children, which may mean that ethnic minority groups were more impacted by school closures.
- 4.42.3. School closures meant children in low income families were at increased risk of hunger. Although this risk was substantially mitigated by the implementation of a system for providing free school meals in almost all schools, hunger remained a concern in particular for families with low incomes and children who were ill or disabled.
- 4.42.4. Children from low income families, and from some ethnic groups where overcrowded households were more likely, were also disadvantaged by more challenging home working environments, including, lack of access to laptops and lack of access to a distraction-free space to learn in.

---

<sup>125</sup> JF/132 - INQ000050235: Social Distancing Review - Assessment of the impact of current measures 30.04.20

<sup>126</sup> JF/133 - INQ000249583: Decision Paper - Social Distancing Review and Next Steps

<sup>127</sup> JF/134 - INQ000050379: Cabinet Office Equality analysis of social distancing measures 06 May 2020

- 4.42.5. The needs of children with SEND were harder to meet because of staffing issues at special and residential schools (where ratios are much higher than in mainstream schools).

Remote learning

- 4.43. It was the responsibility of DfE to ensure that schools could continue to teach whilst closed, but given the scale of the delivery challenge, the Cabinet Office provided oversight and cross government coordination to support and enable DfE in the provision of remote learning.
- 4.44. By 25 March 2020, DfE had identified an estimated 700,000 pupils in secondary schools who lacked adequate broadband connectivity or devices to participate effectively in remote learning and sought support from Cabinet Office to join-up with wider cross-government efforts to improve connectivity for priority groups.<sup>128</sup>
- 4.45. On 27 March 2020, the No.10 Policy Unit convened a meeting with DCMS, DfE and NHSX to coordinate cross-government efforts to improve connectivity for the NHS, vulnerable people and remote learners. Officials recognised that urgent work was required to clarify policy priorities, the approach to liaising with industry and delivery options. Remote learning, particularly for vulnerable families, was acknowledged as a priority requiring the provision of both connectivity and devices.<sup>129</sup> DfE was commissioned to specify the scale and nature of the need for remote learners, including how prioritisation within the pupil population would take place, and to consider funding options to pay for devices.<sup>130</sup>
- 4.46. DCMS was commissioned on 30 March 2020 to lead on analysing the options. DCMS subsequently produced advice, with input from DfE and NHS-X, addressing the three key areas of health, remote learning and vulnerable adults, to identify options for delivery and to assess industry capacity.<sup>131</sup> Officials reviewed the draft paper on 3 April 2020 and obtained feedback from other departments, including HMT.<sup>132</sup> EDS's role was to contribute the technical data and analysis required to underpin the options analysis, while the Crown Commercial Service was to provide insight on supply levels of devices.

---

<sup>128</sup> JF/135 - INQ000546590: Email, Priority Student Connectivity, 25.03.20

<sup>129</sup> JF/136 - INQ000546588: Email, Connectivity - NHS, vulnerable people and remote learners, 27.03.20

<sup>130</sup> JF/137 - INQ000546587 Email, Connectivity/Devices for NHS, Vulnerable People and Remote Learners, 27.03.20

<sup>131</sup> JF/138 - INQ000546582: Email, Connectivity for Covid-19, 30.03.20

<sup>132</sup> JF/139 - INQ000546581: DCMS Draft Paper Establishing HMG's prioritisation of device and connectivity needs (April 2020); JF/140 - INQ000546580: Emails, Connectivity for Covid19, 30.03.20 - 03.04.20

- 4.47. The GPSMIG<sup>133</sup> discussed the final paper by DCMS on 8 April 2020, entitled ‘Establishing HMG’s prioritisation of device and connectivity needs’.<sup>134</sup> It identified vulnerable children and education as high priority groups, noting as a key objective the need to ensure that children in need and care givers had access to social care services. The paper proposed that 176,400 devices be made available for vulnerable children on the basis that remote safeguarding measures were reliant on digital infrastructure which was not available in every household. Another key objective was to ensure that disadvantaged priority learners could continue learning and minimise the widening of the attainment gap. The Education Endowment Foundation had estimated that the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers would grow by between 25% and 75%, compared to what it would have been by the end of term, if schools remained closed. Pupils approaching GCSE and A levels faced greatest risk followed by reception to year 2 and then years 5 and 6. To meet the needs of this group and to enable teachers who lacked their own devices to provide educational content remotely, it was proposed that 95,100 keyboard devices be made available for teachers and secondary students and 370,700 devices for other priority groups. It was estimated that 80% of eligible users would take up the offer.
- 4.48. At the GPSMIG on 8 April 2020, the committee agreed the prioritisation of device and connectivity needs set out in the DCMS paper, subject to working with DWP to include as a priority group those in need of accessing benefits. It was further agreed that all departments should engage with HMT at the earliest opportunity to discuss requests for extra technology or connectivity. DCMS was tasked to engage with DfE to identify the websites of greatest benefit for remote learning and to work with companies to explore opportunities to improve access to educational content. It was also asked to ensure engagement with communication services providers was coordinated with the HO point of contact on domestic violence, supporting vulnerable children and reducing online harm.<sup>135</sup>
- 4.49. The Cabinet Office also drew on work from various educational charities to inform its understanding of the ability of schools to offer online teaching and resources, and access to laptops for students. By mid-May 2020, £60 million had been secured by DfE to deliver 220,000 devices and connectivity packages to disadvantaged children preparing for exams in Year 10; such as care leavers and children in secondary school with a social worker who could not access the internet.<sup>136</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> JF/141 - INQ000273222: Agenda, GPSMIG 08.04.20; JF/142 - INQ000083407: Chair’s Brief, GPSMIG 08.04.20

<sup>134</sup> JF/143 - INQ000273219: DCMS Paper Establishing HMG’s prioritisation of device and connectivity needs (April 2020); JF/144 - INQ000273220: Annex to DCMS Paper

<sup>135</sup> JF/145 - INQ000083405: Actions and Decisions, GPSMIG 08.04.20

<sup>136</sup> JF/146 - INQ000083588: DfE Paper on Vulnerable Children and Young People 20.05.20

## Exams

- 4.50. On 20 March 2020, DfE announced that the exam regulator, Ofqual, and exam boards would work with teachers to provide grades to students whose exams had been cancelled. The announcement said: 'Ofqual will develop and set out a process that will provide a calculated grade to each student which reflects their performance as fairly as possible, and will work with the exam boards to ensure this is consistently applied for all students. The exam boards will be asking teachers, who know their students well, to submit their judgement about the grade that they believe the student would have received if exams had gone ahead...The exam boards will then combine this information with other relevant data, including prior attainment, and use this information to produce a calculated grade for each student, which will be a best assessment of the work they have put in'. Ofqual and exam boards were to discuss with teachers' representatives before finalising an approach, to ensure that it was as fair as possible.<sup>137</sup> On 31 March 2020, the Education Secretary issued a direction letter to Ofqual, directing it to set out a process for providing calculated grades for GCSEs, AS and A levels<sup>138</sup>. It did so by way of a policy document on 3 April 2020.<sup>139</sup>
- 4.51. On 7 April 2020, GPSMIG received an update from DfE on the approach to exams. Schools and colleges were being asked to make a "fair, objective and carefully considered" judgement of the grade students would have been most likely to receive and, on that basis, to provide an assessment grade for each student. They were also asked to provide a rank order of students by subject, outlining the highest to the lowest attaining students within each grade to enable Ofqual to apply statistical standardisation across all schools and colleges. GPSMIG was informed that students would be offered the opportunity to take exams in autumn or the following summer to attain their grades.<sup>140</sup> As an action, DfE was to work with Ofqual to build on recent guidance in developing a detailed approach to exams and plans for students due to sit exams in academic years prior to their age-group final examination year.<sup>141</sup> The Education Secretary issued a direction letter about vocational and technical qualifications on 9 April 2020, and the process for these was published by Ofqual on 3 April 2020.<sup>142</sup>
- 4.52. On 1 May 2020, CDL chaired a meeting of the GPSMIG which considered the arrangements for exams and awarding grades. In his briefing,<sup>143</sup> CDL was encouraged to ask if DfE's

---

<sup>137</sup> JF/147 - INQ000546748: Press Release, Further Details on exams and grades announced 20.03.20

<sup>138</sup> JF/148 - INQ000546786: Letter, SoSE to Ofqual 31.03.20

<sup>139</sup> JF/149 - INQ000546784: News Story, How GCSEs, AS and A Levels will be awarded in summer 2020 03.04.20

<sup>140</sup> JF/117 - INQ000267986: DfE Paper on school provision 06.04.20

<sup>141</sup> JF/118 - INQ000083392: Actions, GPSMIG 07.04.20

<sup>142</sup> JF/150 - INQ000546790: Guidance on Awarding qualifications in summer 2020, 03.04.20

<sup>143</sup> JF/151 - INQ000083519: Chair's Brief, GPSMIG 01.05.20

Minister for School Standards was satisfied that Ofqual's proposals for addressing potential bias in the grades submitted by exam centres were sufficiently robust. The Minister for School Standards set out the process. The readout<sup>144</sup> records that: 'This approach is not something we'd choose to do had we not been forced by the current crisis. There is confidence that Ofqual's arrangements will be as fair as possible and will allow students to progress. The HE sector will be as flexible as possible in support of this'. It adds that there were still 'significant risks: delivery risks; legal and presentational risks; risk to confidence in qualifications students receive'. There was confidence Ofqual was managing these risks well, but they could not be eliminated entirely. The Group also considered the approaches proposed in Wales and Scotland and discussed specific challenges for SEND pupils and homeschooled students. DfE took an action to update the Committee following the publication of the response to Ofqual's consultation on 15 May 2020, and to present a robust handling plan for parents, teachers and students.<sup>145</sup> However, as Helen MacNamara, Deputy Cabinet Secretary, noted in a subsequent briefing to the Prime Minister, GPSMIG did not in fact return to this issue: the MIGs were disbanded later in the month and the exams issue was not picked up by the new COVID-O Committee.<sup>146</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> JF/152 - INQ000083620: Readout, GPSMIG 01.05.20

<sup>145</sup> JF/153 - INQ000083521: Actions, GPSMIG 01.05.20

<sup>146</sup> JF/154 - INQ000137292: Briefing to Prime Minister, Exam Results 2020 - What happened? 24.08.20

## 5. SCHOOL REOPENING AND EXAMINATIONS - SPRING / SUMMER 2020

### Summary

- 5.1. From the end of April through to August 2020, the Cabinet Office coordinated work across government departments on the return to school. It provided scrutiny to help ensure that plans had a solid evidence base, were stress tested and aligned with the latest data and scientific advice. This challenge helped to make sure that plans could be implemented effectively across the relevant sectors, to control the virus but also to restore children to their educational settings and reduce the negative impacts to their educational attainment and welfare.
- 5.2. Through the late spring, the data picture and understanding of the virus continued to improve - leading to an acknowledgement that the pandemic would last longer than hoped. Wider and longer-term impacts on children and young people were considered. The Dashboard brought together scientific data with an expanded range of indicators from across sectors to underpin decision making, with the addition of specific metrics on vulnerable children. The impact of educational restrictions and adjustments to services on the most vulnerable children was recognised and there was policy-making to mitigate these risks, for example cross-government work to ensure the continued provision of free school meals, as well as bolstering social work and voluntary services to tackle safeguarding issues.
- 5.3. Work to understand and balance impacts on children's wellbeing, their educational attainment, the economy and the spread of the virus were prominent during this period, with the brokering of NPIs such as the use of face coverings to enable the return to school. Tiering was introduced, with arrangements for local restrictions which protected education and early years provision.
- 5.4. The Cabinet Office drove forward and stress tested the package of cross-cutting measures put together by departments to enable the full return to school in September 2020. This included coordinating work across departments to advance (for example) the provision of testing kits and PPE packs, as well as guidance on hand washing, face masks and the management of bubbles. Government communications campaigns emphasised that schools were safe.
- 5.5. On remote learning, 370,000 devices had been distributed by the end of August 2020 with schools being offered greater support and access to online resources. As a result, there was a shift in focus towards monitoring and improving the quantity and quality of the remote learning being provided.

### The Covid-19 Dashboard

- 5.6. During the summer of 2020 the Covid-19 Dashboard, which had been produced initially by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, became the responsibility of a new CO data and analytics team in the CTF, and expanded significantly in its coverage. The Dashboard brought together data from across sectors (education, transport, local authorities, NSPCC) in order to monitor pupil attendance, pupil transport, the ability of local authorities to deliver services to vulnerable children, and UK Childline's reported rates of abuse - which showed that neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse were above pre-lockdown baselines. The dashboards between 5 June<sup>147</sup> and 14 June 2020<sup>148</sup> illustrate that the data collection was evolving to fill knowledge gaps, for example where attendance data needed refinement and the inclusion of NSPCC child protection referrals to the police. From 22 June 2020, the Dashboard included data on the proportion of vulnerable children with an EHCP or social worker attending school.<sup>149</sup> As the data and analysis capability evolved, the impact of lockdown on children and young people could be monitored more closely. This provided a clearer basis on which to formulate policy options and base decisions.

### Consideration of education reopening

- 5.7. On 16 April 2020, the First Secretary of State (FSS) set out "5 specific things which the government will need to be satisfied of before we will consider it safe to adjust any of the current measures". These were:
- 5.7.1. Confidence in NHS capacity to cope with Covid and non-Covid care;
  - 5.7.2. Sustained and consistent fall in daily death rates from the virus;
  - 5.7.3. Reliable data showing that rate of infection has decreased to acceptable levels;
  - 5.7.4. Operational challenges including testing and PPE availability were in hand;
  - 5.7.5. Assurance that any adjustments would not risk a second peak that overwhelms the NHS.
- 5.8. The FSS and CDL met with senior officials on 20 April 2020 following a Quad meeting. The accompanying advice highlighted that one of the factors that would determine the measures

---

<sup>147</sup> JF/155 - INQ000283933: C-19 Dashboard 102 p.30, 74, 75, 95, 96, 05.06.20

<sup>148</sup> JF/156 - INQ000283898: C-19 Dashboard 108 p16, 38, 85, 86, 102, 103, 104, 14.06.20

<sup>149</sup> JF/157 - INQ000283662: C-19 Dashboard 113 p11, 12, 49, 101, 102, 103, 119, 120, 121, 122, 22.06.20

in the next phase included the impact on wellbeing, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable and especially vulnerable children.<sup>150</sup>

- 5.9. A number of areas of focus were covered in that meeting - including a discussion on the approach to schools which was supported by a paper entitled 'Schools Fiche'.<sup>151</sup> Only 1% of the pupil population was attending school (4% of eligible vulnerable children and 2% of critical workers' children attending as of 6-9 April). It was recognised that workplaces, schools and transportation were cross-cutting sectors when it came to moving to the next phase of social distancing measures: many parents could not return to work unless they were confident that their children could safely return to school, and many children could not attend school until school transportation was provided.<sup>152</sup> Various options for developing the current measures in respect of schools and education provision were discussed.
- 5.10. This strategy work was further developed for a Quad meeting on 22 April 2020.<sup>153</sup> A note was provided setting out the underlying assumptions to test, an initial prioritisation proposition for changing social distancing measures and a set of contingencies to adopt. The initial prioritisation was (a) getting people back to work, followed by (b) reopening schools in a phased manner either starting with particular year groups focusing on key transition and assessment years, or focussing on primary schools only, or allowing all children to return but through a rota system of time. This would be in addition to encouraging more children of key workers and vulnerable children to attend.
- 5.11. A total of 8 theoretical models were considered in terms of staggering or phasing the reopening and the risks and benefits of each model were discussed.<sup>154</sup>
- 5.12. It was considered that in any scenario, vulnerable children would need to be given further support to take up their childcare and school places, or outside settings if still not attending, through local authorities and social workers. Many children in care, on the edge of care, or otherwise vulnerable, were under 11. As with workplaces and transport, any return to school would be supported with a 'safer spaces' programme which would prioritise: provision of hand-washing and sanitiser stations, regular deep cleaning; distancing measures, and temporary relaxing of group gatherings. It was considered that NPIs such as mask-wearing and temperature-checking could have an effect on parental confidence even if the substantial benefits were marginal.

---

<sup>150</sup> JF/158 - INQ000249542: Paper C19 Strategy Quad Strategy Stocktake 20.04.20; JF/159 - INQ000220058: Read out of quad meeting 20.04.20

<sup>151</sup> JF/160 - INQ000249541: Paper C19 Strategy Quad Schools Fiche 20.04.20

<sup>152</sup> JF/161 - INQ000249538: Paper C19 Strategy Quad Workplaces Fiche 20.04.20

<sup>153</sup> JF/162 - INQ000182353: Paper Draft Strategy Note 22.04.20; See also JF/163 - INQ000182355: ANNEX E Social Distancing Options Schools & Childcare 22.04.20

<sup>154</sup> JF/163 - INQ000182355: ANNEX E Social Distancing Options Schools & Childcare 22.04.20

- 5.13. The benefits weighed included the economic advantages associated with a return of parents to work and supporting children's educational and future economic opportunities. The social benefits included the well-being benefits for children and especially the most vulnerable, education outcomes, and fairness across the population. Any extension of the current measures would mean, for children, missing a further period of education. This would have impacts on children's education, social contacts and mental health, and a disproportionate impact on vulnerable children.<sup>155</sup>
- 5.14. The risk of any further reopening was the impact of excessive social contact on health outcomes. Phases and limits were, therefore, proposed. It was considered that efficient test, track and trace would reduce the impact of the re-introduction of household links and manage down the R rate. It was noted that protocols would need to be developed on what action to take when children and staff tested positive, including provision of online teaching. DfE was asked to develop these options in more detail and for all options to confirm the measures required.<sup>156</sup>
- 5.15. At a GPSMIG meeting on 21 April 2020<sup>157</sup>, the Education Secretary noted that since its launch on 24 March 2020, some schools had struggled to access the platform for ordering free school meals vouchers. HMT had previously agreed that the vouchers would be worth £15 per week (an uplift from the existing rate of £11.50) to cover the Easter holidays as well as term times. DfE provided an update on work to resolve this, and committed to work with DWP and DEFRA to review the voucher scheme and indicate its longer-term viability.<sup>158</sup>
- 5.16. The work on free school meals was followed up at a GPSMIG meeting on 22 April 2020<sup>159</sup> with DfE and DWP working together to resolve the time lag between the claiming of benefits and the eligibility of children for free school meals. DfE's Minister for Children and Families also flagged the need to support the whole family around a vulnerable child, giving the example of food packages being designed for only one individual and foster families where the care givers were elderly.
- 5.17. A meeting of the EBRMIG, chaired by the Chancellor on 23 April 2020, explored the cross-cutting issues between the economy and education sectors. The HMT/BEIS paper

<sup>155</sup> A similar point was made in the context of the trade off between continuing social distancing measures and minimising forgone economic activity, "damage to the life chances of vulnerable groups such as disadvantaged children because (e.g.) they receive a poorer education than they otherwise would"; JF/164 - INQ000182359: ANNEX M Analysing the Trade-off Between Continuing COVID-19 Social Distancing and Minimising Foregone Economic Activity and Other Costs 22.04.20

<sup>156</sup> JF/165 - INQ000182363: ANNEX B Principles for the Design of Behavioural and Social Interventions 21.04.20

<sup>157</sup> JF/166 - INQ000083478: Brief, GPSMIG 21.04.20

<sup>158</sup> JF/167 - INQ000083472: Actions and Decisions, GPSMIG 21.04.20

<sup>159</sup> JF/168 - INQ000083602: Minutes, GPSMIG 22.04.20

on operationalising an economic ‘restart’ noted that schools should support the process for people going back to work. It was noted that, among other matters, a core enabler of getting people “back to work” was some degree of “education as childcare” to support the approximately 20% of workers who had younger children or were primary carers and did not have a non-working partner.<sup>160</sup> It was discussed that reopening schools would make 3 million parents fully available to work. This was to be done gradually, as enforcing social distancing with children would be challenging, and be signalled in advance, to help manage the system. It was noted that parents needed to have confidence that schools were safe places for their children. It was also noted that close links between work on safer workplaces, education and transport were needed to ensure that changes to any of these areas took into account the practical requirements of the others.<sup>161</sup>

- 5.18. A GPSMIG meeting on 23 April 2020 discussed early years provision and demand in England, supported by a DfE paper.<sup>162</sup> It was estimated that 26% of all known childcare settings were open with around 65,000 children attending an early years setting. This consisted of 59,000 children of critical workers (5%) and 6,000 vulnerable children (6%). A Cabinet Office poll showed that 29% of critical workers were keeping young children at home over safety concerns and 16% over concerns of the safety of vulnerable members of the household. 9% of critical workers were struggling because their current provider was closed and no convenient alternative could be found. Whilst local authorities indicated that they could meet existing demand for childcare places for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children they, together with DfE, were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on the short and long term financial stability of the childcare market if providers did not reopen quickly enough. The immediate plan to mitigate risks and financial concerns was, among other things, to continue funding local authorities, to amend regulations<sup>163</sup> to temporarily modify some requirements to give settings flexibility to respond to changes in workforce availability, and to monitor the impact of COVID-19 and regularly engage with sector representatives, local authorities and associated intelligence gathering. Actions to support early years providers were recorded for discussion the following week.<sup>164</sup>

---

<sup>160</sup> JF/169 - INQ000064807: HMT and BEIS Paper - Operationalising an Economic Restart under Extended NPIs for EBRMIG 23.04.20

<sup>161</sup> JF/170 - INQ000083334: Minutes, EBRMIG 23.04.20

<sup>162</sup> JF/171 - INQ000083488: DfE Paper - Early Years Provision and Demand in England During COVID-19 for GPSMIG 23.04.20

<sup>163</sup> Supported by JF/172 - INQ000083489: MHCLG Paper - Local Authorities Prioritisation of Duties for GPSMIG 23.04.20

<sup>164</sup> JF/173 - INQ000083492: Actions and Decisions, GPSMIG 23.04.20

- 5.19. The 9:15 C-19 Strategy Group met on 24 April 2020 and discussed non-shielding vulnerable groups and support provisions.<sup>165</sup> There was a concern that school attendance for vulnerable children was low, leading to a widening attainment gap between vulnerable children and their peers. The immediate next steps identified were to encourage attendance through clear guidance and follow-up of non-attendance, bolstering social work and the funding of voluntary services to safeguard and manage the increased risks of the current situation, and to support progress for this group through clear communication to parents and mental health support. In discussion it was noted that further consideration needed to be given to those children currently in Pupil Referral Units and to those involved with gangs. The GPSMIG was to oversee ongoing follow up work on improving data available on different vulnerable groups, the work of HMT and DWP to consider the support being provided by the welfare state, and making sure there was the right balance between Government and local intervention in supporting vulnerable people.<sup>166</sup>
- 5.20. On 28 April 2020, under the Coronavirus Act 2020, the Secretary of State for Education issued a notice temporarily disapplying offences relating to the failure of parents to secure regular attendance at school of a registered pupil, meaning that parents could not be prosecuted or convicted for not sending their children to school during the specified period. The notices were applied between April 2020 and July 2020 and in January and February 2021.<sup>167</sup>
- 5.21. The reopening of schools was discussed at an EBRMIG meeting on 30 April 2020. Of concern was how schools would be reopening in accordance with social distancing guidelines, with particular challenges around how to maintain social distancing guidance at school gates and how to safely reinstate public transport for schools. It was crucial that schools had enough time to implement the necessary measures to open safely. It was noted that the existing guidance for safe social distancing of 2 metres was a significant inhibitor for schools returning to full capacity, but that work to reopen should continue at pace in early years settings and primary schools as critical enablers of other sectors returning to work safely.<sup>168</sup>
- 5.22. A GPSMIG meeting on 30 April 2020 discussed the options for reopening schools and the early years sector. The discussion was supported by DfE's paper 'Early years: Covid-19

---

<sup>165</sup> JF/174 - INQ000088667: Paper - Mapping Non-Shielding Vulnerable Groups and Support Provisions 24.04.20; JF/175 - INQ000088638: Minute Covid-19 Strategy Ministerial Group 24.04.20

<sup>166</sup> JF/176 - INQ000088668: Actions and Decisions, Covid-19 Strategy Ministerial Group 24.04.20

<sup>167</sup> JF/177 - INQ000622793 Guidance: Disapplication notice: school attendance legislation changes 30.04.20

<sup>168</sup> JF/178 - INQ000083343: Covid-19 Economic and Business Response Implementation Group 30.04.20; JF/179 - INQ000083341: Actions and Decisions, EBRMIG 30.04.20

impact and financial sustainability of the childcare market'<sup>169</sup> which identified the childcare market as key to economic recovery: 1.7m children typically used formal childcare provision, with Cabinet Office data showing that if the rules generally were to be relaxed, childcare availability would be the top reason preventing parents from returning to work. The importance of early years education to long-term attainment benefits was highlighted, as was the contribution of the day-care market to the economy and the wider economic benefits of parents having access to childcare. At that time, 34% of all settings were open with 6% of children of critical workers and 10% of vulnerable children in attendance. The long-term financial viability of the childcare market was discussed, it being emphasised that the market was at risk of failure, operating on tight margins and having been vulnerable even before COVID-19. The current financial support packages were discussed as well as steps to be taken in the run up to reopening. DfE were commissioned to ensure comprehensive engagement with local and national partners prior to and throughout decision-making regarding the reopening of schools, and to work with HMT and MHCLG to develop a transition plan for the early years sector away from the current support packages.<sup>170</sup>

- 5.23. On 1 May 2020, a C-19 Strategy meeting conducted a 'deep dive' on face coverings, in which it was noted that, given the particular difficulty of social distancing in schools, if the Government put out a statement on wearing face masks there would be an expectation from staff and parents these would be supplied<sup>171</sup>. The group discussed the prioritisation of higher-grade face masks to the NHS, because (as the Prime Minister summarised) face coverings were not considered the most important NPI and home-made face coverings would have some value in schools.<sup>172</sup>
- 5.24. Also on 1 May 2020, HMIG discussed the progress of the pilot of the Test, Track and Trace Programme. It was noted that children may not have access to mobile phones and the proposed app, but would be able to participate by way of the telephone contact tracing service. DHSC were commissioned to work with DfE on how the Test, Track and Trace programme would work in schools.<sup>173</sup>
- 5.25. Following discussions between No.10, DfE, HMT and BEIS, the Education Secretary announced on 3 May 2020 a package of measures and financial support for the HE sector, to

<sup>169</sup> JF/180 - INQ000273191: Paper - Early Years Covid-19 Impact and Financial Sustainability of the Childcare Market GPSMIG 30.04.20

<sup>170</sup> JF/181 - INQ000273190: Actions and Decisions, GPSMIG 30.04.20

<sup>171</sup> JF/182 - INQ000088659: Minute - C-19 Strategy meeting 01 May 2020

<sup>172</sup> JF/183 - INQ000088658: Agenda, Covid-S 01.05.20; JF/184 - INQ000088657: PM Briefing 01.05.20; JF/182 - INQ000088659: Minutes, Covid-S 01.05.20; JF/185 - INQ000088529: Actions and Decisions, Covid-S 01.05.20

<sup>173</sup> JF/186 - INQ000083666: Paper - Test Trace and Certify Programme HMIG 01.05.20; JF/187 - INQ000083707: Minutes, HMIG 01.05.20; JF/188 - INQ000083670: Actions, HMIG 01.05.20

stabilise admissions and assist students. The measures included controls on student intakes, funding to bolster clearing processes and to alleviate student hardship, as well as support to universities with regards to overseas students.<sup>174</sup> The Education Secretary outlined the packages at GPSMIG on 4 May 2020.<sup>175</sup>

5.26. A Quad meeting on 6 May 2020 discussed COVID-19 strategy, ahead of a ministerial COBR meeting planned later that week. The group's position was that, subject to the condition that infections were under control, some younger children should return to school on 1 June 2020. Secondary schools would not return before September 2020 at the earliest. In formulating this proposal, the group rejected a proposal for students to attend on a week-on / week-off rota.<sup>176</sup> They received advice from SAGE, which modelled the impact of reopening schools and concluded that, overall, reopening for younger children would have less impact than opening for older students.<sup>177</sup>

5.27. Also considered in the Quad meeting of 6 May 2020 was the Cabinet Office's Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) assessment on the impacts of social distancing measures (including restrictions on movement and restrictions on gatherings) brought about by emergency legislation and guidance.<sup>178</sup> That assessment included, as relevant to children and young people, the following analysis:

5.27.1. That while social distancing disproportionately affected older people, younger people in the 18-24 age bracket were more likely to report they were not coping as well as usual.

5.27.2. Children and young people at school and university were affected by the closures of their educational settings and the cancellation of exams.

5.27.3. Particularly negatively affected by school closures were those with special educational needs.

5.27.4. Mitigations in place included regional action teams working to increase school attendance by vulnerable children, as well as activities to support at-home learning. Primary school pupils were noted as being more likely to find at-home learning difficult compared with secondary school pupils.

---

<sup>174</sup> JF/189 - INQ000546782: Press Release, Government support package for universities and students 04.05.20

<sup>175</sup> JF/190 - INQ000083621: Minutes, GPSMIG 04.05.20

<sup>176</sup> JF/191 - INQ000249582: Agenda QUAD 06.05.20; JF/133 - INQ000249583: Draft Advice Note QUAD 06.05.20

<sup>177</sup> JF/192 - INQ000074958: SAGE Commission Return QUAD 06.05.20

<sup>178</sup> JF/134 - INQ000050379 Paper - Equality Analysis of Social Distancing Measures 06.05.20

- 5.27.5. There was inequality in access to resources for at home learning. Of note, Ofcom stated in 2019 that both schools and children in deprived areas were considerably less likely to have ICT access than those in affluent areas. The report further analysed race and ethnicity as also being factors which made some children less able to access home learning, and so increasing the impact of school closures on those groups.
- 5.27.6. Young LGB people and trans youth were also noted as being particularly at risk of negative impacts of social distancing, due to isolation in hostile environments and challenges in accessing support networks and healthcare.
- 5.28. The PSED assessment concluded that the effects of social distancing were particularly felt by those with protected characteristics, including the young. The disadvantages to these groups were likely to become more acute as social distancing continued. However, the assessment concluded that, considering the reduction in transmission that social distancing was having, there was no evidence that the inequalities impacts were disproportionate, although this should be thoroughly assessed and reviewed.
- 5.29. At the same Quad meeting, ministers also considered a Cabinet Office summary assessment of the economic, health and social impact of the current social distancing measures across society. It included consideration of the effect of school closures on education, long term prospects, the increased risk of harm for vulnerable students of not attending school, and access to food for children in low income families.<sup>179</sup> The summary reflected that the impacts of the social distancing measures were falling disproportionately on those who were already disadvantaged and that the loss of education would cause 'long-term scarring', particularly for disadvantaged children. A 50% increase in calls to Refuge's National Domestic Abuse helpline was noted for w/c 6 April compared with 2019 levels.
- 5.30. On 7 May 2020, the issue of facemasks in non-clinical settings such as schools and in educational facilities was further discussed in two meetings: C-19 Strategy<sup>180</sup> and the

---

<sup>179</sup> JF/132 - INQ000050235: Social Distancing Review - Assessment of the Impact of Current Measures 30.04.20

<sup>180</sup> JF/193 - INQ000251061: Morning Update 11.05.20; JF/194 - INQ000088649: Minute Covid-19 Strategy Ministerial Group 07.05.20; JF/195 - INQ000088576: Actions and Decisions, Covid-19 Strategy Ministerial Group 07.05.20

HMIG.<sup>181</sup> In both meetings, the point was made that the evidence did not establish that medical grade PPE was required in schools.

- 5.31. At the HMIG meeting, in the context of detailed discussion about the effectiveness of shielding and the importance of ensuring that people were not falling between the gaps, it was noted that schools should have a contact point if they identified a child who may need to be shielded,<sup>182</sup> and DHSC and MHCLG took an action to look into the feasibility of the dynamic support register (which was a list of people at risk of admission to mental health inpatient services if they did not get the right support in the community) including information on children's shielding status.<sup>183</sup>
- 5.32. At a COBR meeting, chaired by the Prime Minister on 10 May 2020, the Health Secretary said that proposed changes in June and July included a return of year one and year six pupils to schools with the introduction of smaller classes sizes, a phased re-opening of non-essential retail and (in July) phased opening of hospitality, with social distancing measures in place. All decisions were contingent on epidemiological advice. In discussion, there was commitment to the Four Nations approach and the importance of a predictable and reliable sharing of information, as well as recognition that it may be appropriate for differences in approach/speed depending on the scientific evidence.<sup>184</sup>
- 5.33. On Monday 11 May 2020, the Government published 'Our plan to rebuild': the UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy'.<sup>185</sup> This aimed to return to life as close to normal as possible in a way that minimised the spread of the virus and maximised health, economic and social outcomes. The Plan set out how restrictions would be gradually eased, on the basis of the 5 tests which had been laid out in April. Step 2, which would be made no earlier than 1 June, subject to those conditions being satisfied, included:

- 5.33.1. "A phased return for early years settings and schools. Schools should prepare to begin to open for more children from 1 June. The Government expects children to be able to return to early years settings, and for Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 to be back in school in smaller sizes, from this point. This aims to ensure that the youngest children, and those preparing for the transition to secondary school, have maximum time with their teachers. Secondary schools and FE colleges should also prepare to

---

<sup>181</sup> JF/196 - INQ000083698: Minutes, HMIG 07.05.20; JF/197 - INQ000083677: Actions and Decisions, HMIG 07.05.20

<sup>182</sup> JF/196 - INQ000083698: Minutes, HMIG 07.05.20

<sup>183</sup> JF/197 - INQ000083677: Actions and Decisions, HMIG 07.05.20

<sup>184</sup> JF/198 - INQ000083782: Paper - Approach to Social Distancing Measures COBR 10.05.20; JF/199 - INQ000083828: Minutes, COBR 10.05.20

<sup>185</sup> JF/200 - INQ000137210: Our Plan to Rebuild the UK Government's Covid-19 Recovery Strategy May 2020 11.05.20

begin some face to face contact with Year 10 and 12 pupils who have key exams next year, in support of their continued remote, home learning. The Government's ambition is for all primary school children to return to school before the summer for a month if feasible, though this will be kept under review. The Department of Education will engage closely with schools and early years providers to develop further detail and guidance on how schools should facilitate this."

5.33.2. The Prime Minister gave an accompanying statement in the House of Commons.<sup>186</sup>

5.34. At Cabinet on 21 May 2020 the Prime Minister confirmed that further decisions about changes to social distancing measures would be made in the coming days. In discussion it was noted that the aim was to reopen the maximum number of schools; the sooner children could return to the classroom the more opportunity they would have, although it was recognised that not all children would return at the same time as some local authorities and schools would move slower than others.<sup>187</sup>

5.35. On 24 May 2020, the Prime Minister confirmed that the phased reopening of schools would begin on 1 June 2020, consistent with the Government's plan for easing restrictions.<sup>188</sup> From that date, nurseries and certain primary school years would reopen (being reception, Year 1 and Year 6). After that, from mid-June 2020, secondary schools would begin to provide some contact for Year 10 and Year 12 students to help them prepare for exams scheduled for 2021, with up to a quarter of these students in at any point. The Prime Minister highlighted that the government had published guidance on measures to keep children and staff safe, including reducing class size, staggering breaks and travel, and increasing the frequency of cleaning.<sup>189</sup> He further said that all children and staff and their families would have access to testing.

5.36. The reopening of schools was discussed in a meeting of the Cabinet on 25 May 2020.<sup>190</sup> The Prime Minister praised schools' success in educating vulnerable children and the children of key workers and noted that the next challenge was to increase the numbers of children in schools. While there would be no deadline for getting all children into school, the Prime Minister set the ambition for all primary school children to have one month's education before the summer holiday.

<sup>186</sup> JF/201 - INQ000086784 Prime Minister's Statement at Press Conference 11.05.20; JF/202 - Prime Minister's Statement in the House of Commons 11.05.20

<sup>187</sup> JF/203 - INQ000089051: Minutes, Cabinet 21.05.20

<sup>188</sup> JF/204 - INQ00008678 Prime Minister's Statement on Coronavirus (COVID-19) 24.05.20

<sup>189</sup> JF/205 - INQ000546789: Actions for Education and Childcare Settings to Prepare for Wider Opening 11.05.20

<sup>190</sup> JF/206 - INQ000089074: Minutes, Cabinet 25.05.20

- 5.37. The point regarding testing of children to enable their return to school was picked up in an HMIG meeting on 26 May 2020, in which DHSC took an action to confirm with DfE the availability of testing for under 5s as part of the Test, Trace, Contain and Enable programme.<sup>191</sup>

*Delivering and monitoring the reopening of primary schools*

- 5.38. As set out above, from 28 May 2020, the MIGs were stood down and replaced by the COVID-S and COVID-O committees. Discussion and collective decisions in relation to education took place primarily in COVID-O.
- 5.39. CDL chaired the inaugural COVID-O on 29 May 2020. It considered a report setting out the immediate risks and issues in delivering the Government's COVID-19 response, and key areas the Committee should consider for future planning. This included education, such as the delivery model for a September 2020 reopening, with consideration being given to class sizes, the financial sustainability of private education providers and the HE sector, and the need for future contingency planning outside of the crisis response. It was noted that schools would need guidance by mid-July 2020 in order to reopen and that transport was a high risk area.<sup>192</sup>
- 5.40. At a Cabinet meeting on 2 June 2020, the Transport Secretary reported that every effort was being made to get public transport operating to support the economy and to allow children to return to school, given that the two metre rule had greatly reduced capacity on public transport. In discussion, it was noted that the number of children who could be transported to school by bus would be reduced to less than a quarter of normal capacity by social distancing measures. The GCSA explained that the advice to maintain a distance of two metres was informed by a risk-based approach; a SAGE paper<sup>193</sup> had identified mitigating measures which could be taken to reduce the distance including the wearing of face coverings. To help control the spread of the virus on public transport, it was decided that wearing face coverings on public transport should be mandatory.<sup>194</sup>
- 5.41. COVID-O on 3 June 2020 considered a Cabinet Office paper on shielding, which outlined options for relaxing or tightening restrictions depending on the prevalence of the virus, which acknowledged that the shielded population would continue to occupy unique circumstances

---

<sup>191</sup> JF/207 - INQ000083699: Minutes, HMIG 26.05.20; JF/208 - INQ000083683: Actions and Decisions, HMIG 26.05.20

<sup>192</sup> JF/209 - INQ000088715: Covid Delivery Overview Paper 29.05.20; JF/210 - INQ000088784: Minutes, Covid-O 29.05.20

<sup>193</sup> JF/211 - INQ000546781 SAGE Paper Environmental Influence on Transmission 02.05.20; JF/212 - INQ000546579 Cover Email 22.05.20

<sup>194</sup> JF/213 - INQ000088938: Minutes, Cabinet 02.06.20

amongst wider society.<sup>195</sup> The paper included a set of options for CEV children and young people attending school or university and for those in a 'shielded' household with a CEV person. The core approach was that CEV children and young people should not be expected to attend education settings and that remote education should be provided for these cohorts. Potential variations included 1) attending in line with the 2m rule and using private transport, 2) attending in line with the 2m rule and using public transport, and 3) only children over a certain age attending. Finally, the paper made clear that some families would not be comfortable attending and remote education should be provided in these circumstances.

- 5.42. On 4 June 2020, the inaugural meeting of COVID-S was convened. A Strategy Stocktake paper was presented by the Permanent Secretary at No.10,<sup>196</sup> which identified the choices which ministers would be required to make in the coming weeks, including whether to permit universities and all schools to reopen in the autumn. It laid out an assessment of the equalities impact of the current measures, noting that the attainment gap in education had widened for lower income groups as a result of children spending 30% less time on school work than wealthier pupils. During the meeting, the Prime Minister observed that the Roadmap had permitted some children to return to school and that further consideration would be given by the Committee to the proposal to return [all] primary school pupils for one month before the summer holidays.
- 5.43. In Cabinet on 9 June 2020, the Prime Minister set out the government's intention to announce further steps to relax social distancing measures from 15 June 2020, but acknowledged that the current incidence rate of the virus remained too high to implement all of the proposed lifting of restrictions. This approach was agreed by Cabinet. In discussion, it was recognised that there was a need to provide young people with alternative activities whilst schools were closed over the summer. Further thought was to be given to how the National Citizenship Service and Youth Investment Fund might be used to achieve this.<sup>197</sup>
- 5.44. At Cabinet on 16 June 2020, the Prime Minister observed that considerable effort had been made by the Education Secretary and teachers, with more than 80% of primary schools open. He noted, however, that some parents were reluctant to send their children back to school and that children from more deprived backgrounds were less likely to return to school. The Prime Minister emphasised that the message needed to be clear from everyone that schools were safe. The Education Secretary explained that schools would now be offered more flexibility to bring back other school year groups where there was sufficient capacity to

---

<sup>195</sup> JF/214 - INQ000088716: COVID-O shielding paper 03.06.20

<sup>196</sup> JF/215 - INQ000137225: Paper - Strategy Stocktake Covid-S 04.06.20; JF/216 - INQ000088234: Minutes, Covid-S 04.06.20

<sup>197</sup> JF/217 - INQ000088978: Minutes, Cabinet 09.06.20

do so. In discussion, consideration was given to the needs of vulnerable and deprived children (particularly those with a social worker) who required comprehensive support over the summer. It was suggested that the timing of GCSEs and A levels could be pushed back the following summer to enable pupils in Years 10 and 12 to catch up and to prevent their life chances being affected by missing education. The Education Secretary confirmed that a consultation would soon be launched on the sequencing of exams in 2021 to give children sufficient time to catch up. On the topic of free school meals, the Prime Minister said that they had been designed for children attending school and that any extension to the provision outside of school would bring pitfalls - he noted that the best way in which to support vulnerable children was to ensure their return to school.<sup>198</sup>

- 5.45. At COVID-O on 17 June 2020, chaired by CDL, advice was considered from DfT concerning the management of supply and demand for travel on public transport in England. The paper observed that the return of certain industry sectors and the re-opening of schools gave rise to a significant risk that demand would exceed supply and that social distancing on public transport would not be possible.<sup>199</sup> It was recognised that school transport would present an issue if all children returned to full time education in September. Approximately 15% of school children were transported by bus, of which 8% were transported by a dedicated school bus. These children typically lived in rural settings or had special educational needs. Potential mitigations such as staggering school times and private coaches were explored<sup>200</sup> for which further input was needed from HMT. It was noted, however, that the 2 metre rule was undergoing review. DfE was commissioned to begin a programme of work to prepare for further potential pressures on the transport network as schools started to return in September.<sup>201</sup>
- 5.46. At COVID-S on 19 June 2020, the Prime Minister said the objective was to ensure plans were in place to enable every eligible child to return to school in September, emphasising the social imperative to get children back into school to make up for lost time. There was discussion of various options for enabling pupils to regain lost time in education and funding worth £1billion had been made available to pay for catch-up provision.<sup>202</sup>

---

<sup>198</sup> JF/218 - INQ000089022: Minutes, Cabinet 16.06.20

<sup>199</sup> JF/219 - INQ000088812: Paper - Transport Supply and Demand Covid-O 17.06.20; JF/220 - INQ000088846: Annex A - Restart Projections 17.06.20

<sup>200</sup> JF/221 - INQ000088794: Minutes, Covid-o 17.06.20.

<sup>201</sup> JF/222 - INQ000088810: Actions and Decisions, Covid-O 17.06.20

<sup>202</sup> JF/223 - INQ000088241: Minutes, Covid-S 19.06.20

5.47. The paper provided by DfE for the meeting<sup>203</sup> outlined three possible scenarios for re-opening education in autumn, with international comparisons provided to aid decision making:

5.47.1. First, a full return of all pupils in September, contingent upon several operational requirements which included the removal - or a significant relaxation - of NPIs, sufficient transport capacity and freedom to travel and a return to mandatory attendance.

5.47.2. Second, a partial return with the mixing of pupils and staff restricted by limited bubble sizes or rotas, but with full time provision available for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers. A potential risk to the wellbeing and attainment of disadvantaged pupils without appropriate devices or workspaces was noted and the need for accessible, high quality online provision to be made available to a greater number of students.

5.47.3. Third, the contingency measures required in the event of schools being asked to close. DfE was working with DHSC, PHE and the JBC to provide clear guidance to schools on the steps that should be taken in response to a local outbreak. Moreover, it was recognised that robust plans needed to be in place to provide continuity of education if local lockdowns were imposed. This was a specific concern for vulnerable pupils and those with special educational needs who would be disproportionately affected by anything other than a return to full education.

5.48. The Prime Minister concluded the meeting observing that there was a shared determination to get all children back into school and that a clear message needed to be communicated that there would be a full return to school in September. As a consequence, contingency plans were to be developed but not announced.

5.49. That same day - 19 June 2020 - the government announced the 'catch-up' package for schools to aid educational recovery, which consisted of one-off grants for schools to provide tuition for those children who needed it, and separately, a National Tutoring Programme to increase access to high-quality tuition for the most disadvantaged young people over the 2020/21 academic year. The funding was supported by strategic advice from the National Endowment Fund on how to support pupils, including intervention programmes, extra

---

<sup>203</sup> JF/224 - INQ000088283: Paper - Preparing for Autumn 19.06.20; JF/225 - INQ000088237: Annex A - Summary of International Comparisons 19.06.20

teaching capacity, access to technology and summer schools.<sup>204</sup> I provide further detail on education recovery in Section 8.

5.50. At a Cabinet meeting on 23 June 2020, the Prime Minister presented the package of changes to be effected as part of step 3 of the Roadmap. These had been agreed the previous day at COVID-S. Given the reduction in the rate of infections, the Government was prepared to consider reopening some businesses and services, and outlined how the risk of increased spread could be balanced against the social, economic and non-Covid health impacts of the existing restrictions.

5.51. A review of the 2 metre rule had been conducted by a panel, which included the GCSA and the CMO. It concluded that the Government's guidance should be amended to allow 1 metre social distancing with risk mitigation, in line with other countries such as France and Italy. More broadly, the package included a major reopening of the economy and society which would take effect from 4 July 2020 and be conditional on adherence to COVID-19 secure guidelines. It was envisaged that wraparound care for school aged children and formal childcare provision would resume over the summer and that there would be a full return to school for all primary and secondary pupils from September 2020.<sup>205</sup>

5.52. Later on 23 June 2020, the Prime Minister announced the reopenings which would go ahead on 4 July 2020<sup>206</sup>.

5.53. Preparations for the autumn in respect of schools and early years were reviewed at COVID-O on 25 June 2020,<sup>207</sup> chaired by CDL who emphasised that COVID-S had decided that all pupils should return to full time education and full curriculum in September and that it was the role of COVID-O to give effect to that decision. It would not be possible, however, to implement this approach with full social distancing in place. DfE was therefore proposing that schools should rely upon a system of controls endorsed by PHE to reduce transmission and contain outbreaks. This included implementing a new hierarchy of protective measures, in which:

5.53.1. The use of bubbles by year group would be expected but within year groups would be optional. Clear guidance to schools on bubbles was necessary as bubble sizes of 30 or more pupils were very high risk and the mixing of different groups on school transport would negate the benefit of

---

<sup>204</sup> JF/226 - INQ000546797: Press Release - Billion pound catch-up plan to tackle impact of lost teaching time 19.06.2020

<sup>205</sup> JF/227 - INQ000089070: Paper from the Prime Minister Cabinet 23.06.20

<sup>206</sup> JF/228 - INQ000065411: Speech: Prime Minister's statement on Coronavirus (COVID-19) 23 June 2020

<sup>207</sup> JF/229 - INQ000088790: Minutes, Covid-O 25.06.20; JF/230 - INQ000088819: DfE Paper - Preparing for Autumn 25.06.20

implementing bubbles. Testing was considered to be vital to the successful re-opening of schools and was capable of providing reassurance even if the clinical need was negligible. However, Early Years settings would be allowed to operate without bubbles of students, in light of SAGE modelling which showed the risks to R were extremely low, and low compared to primary and secondary re-opening.

5.53.2. Schools would be expected to close in the event of regional and local lockdowns if necessary, and some children would continue to self-isolate in accordance with the government's guidance.

5.53.3. DfE was to procure approximately 135,000 computers for inclusion in a 'devices library' which could be allocated to children as needed.

5.53.4. In addition, it was recognised that immediate action was required from social services to help socially vulnerable children to return to school in September.

5.54. The provision of both public and home to school transport still presented a significant problem. Even with the proposed reduction in social distancing, it was expected that public transport would likely be operating at 35% of normal capacity in September 2020, but that pressure would be relieved if PHE agreed to vary the social distancing requirements on home to school transport.

5.55. DfE was looking to PHE to endorse its proposals, including securing priority access for schools to the testing regime, and to provide guidance in relation to staff and children at greater risk.<sup>208</sup> It was the role of the CTF to formally review this guidance prior to its publication. DfE were seeking clear advice from PHE on the efficacy of facemasks in education settings, including whether the evidence of their benefit in reducing transmission outweighed the impairment to education, risk of misuse and discomfort.

5.56. The CTF had reviewed the plans prior to the meeting and advised CDL to challenge the Education Secretary to provide more detailed evidence which validated schools ability to successfully operationalise the plan, particularly in relation to health measures (testing capacity and PPE requirements), transport and remote learning.<sup>209</sup> At the conclusion of the meeting, COVID-O agreed that mandatory attendance at school should be enforced from September 2020 but that further consultation with stakeholders was required before the

---

<sup>208</sup> JF/230 - INQ000088819: DfE Paper - Preparing for Autumn 25.06.20

<sup>209</sup> JF/231 - INQ000088816: Briefing, Covid-O 25.06.20

DfE's proposed hierarchy of controls could be implemented.<sup>210</sup> The decisions as circulated were as follows, corresponding to the 5 areas DfE had asked for agreement in paragraph 4 of its paper:

- 5.56.1. Agree 4A (attendance should be mandatory from September), and that DfE should consider how this applies also to remote learning, where relevant.
  - 5.56.2. Agree 4B (PHE endorsed hierarchy of controls) subject to the following conditions:
    - a. Testing priority and capacity is agreed with Dido Harding & Gila Sacks;
    - b. PPE Requirements are agreed with Lord Deighton;
    - c. DHSC agree on the proposed bubbling approach.
  - 5.56.3. Agree 4C (PHE publish risk assessment guidance for staff and children) but the risk assessment must be shared with the C-19 Taskforce for the formal review & consistency check before publication.
  - 5.56.4. Agree 4E (further work with the sector on costs and logistics) subject to HMT agreement to the proposals.
  - 5.56.5. Agree No.10 Comms team must sign off the guidance prior to publication (as part of the formal clearance process)
- 5.57. On 30 June 2020, CDL chaired a further ministerial meeting on the guidance for schools. The Education Secretary, Health Secretary and Chief Secretary attended, as did DfT and MHCLG Ministers, the DCMO, and representatives from PHE and No.10. In his subsequent note to the Prime Minister, CDL's conclusion was that there was agreement to publish the guidance, subject to the following points<sup>211</sup>:
- 5.57.1. DfE incorporate the Health Secretary's points to recommend more strongly that schools should minimise bubbles sizes wherever possible, given the educational impact of isolating larger year group bubbles if there is a positive case;
  - 5.57.2. DfE ensure the guidance is clearer on 'must do' and 'should do' actions;

---

<sup>210</sup> JF/232 - INQ000088754: Actions and Decisions, Covid-O 25.06.20

<sup>211</sup> JF/233 - INQ000546808: CDL note to PM 30.06.20

- 5.57.3. HMT agree the proposal on provision of additional remote devices to support learning in a local lockdown;
- 5.57.4. DfE point to international comparisons that can support the approach as part of the communications plan.
- 5.58. CDL noted he had been clear that the final draft must be agreed with the Health Secretary, DCMO and PHE, and No.10, before publication and that the CTF would work with DfE to deliver this. CDL noted he had also asked that DfE develop worked examples with schools, Trusts and local authorities and publish these soon after the guidance to help schools implement it effectively.
- 5.59. On 2 July 2020, DfE announced that schools and colleges would reopen in full in September 2020.<sup>212</sup> Alongside this announcement DfE published operational guidance for England covering primary schools, secondary schools (including sixth forms), special schools, special post-16 providers and alternative provision (provided by local authorities on educational, health or behavioural grounds), 16 to 19 academies, infant, junior, middle, upper schools and boarding schools, as well as independent schools.<sup>213</sup> Separate guidance was published for early years and childcare settings, FE colleges and providers, special schools, special post-16 providers and alternative provision. Complementary guidance covering children of critical workers and vulnerable children who could access education settings was also published on 2 July 2020.<sup>214</sup>
- 5.60. The announcement of September 2020 reopening and the guidance for this coincided with data, included in the Dashboard, which showed that (at the end of June 2020) school commutes had been above 30% of usual levels for the previous two weeks and 12.9% of all school age children attended school in the UK. An estimated 25% of vulnerable children with an EHCP or social worker had attended school on 25 June 2020.<sup>215</sup>
- 5.61. DHSC guidance was published on 6 July 2020 setting out that the majority of children considered CV and CEV would be removed from the shielded patient list. Most CV and CEV children were encouraged to attend educational settings in-person from September 2020, unless they had specific instructions from a healthcare professional not to do so. Schools were instructed to work with families and healthcare professionals to assess individual risks and to support a safe return to school. Individual risk assessments were encouraged for

<sup>212</sup> JF/234 - INQ000541143: Press Release - Schools and Colleges to reopen in full in September 02.07.20

<sup>213</sup> JF/235 - INQ000542954: Guidance for full opening - schools 02.07.2020

<sup>214</sup> JF/236 - INQ000075731: Guidance - Children of critical workers and vulnerable children who can access schools of educational settings - up to 01.04.22

<sup>215</sup> JF/237 - INQ000283700: C-19 Dashboard 116 p.10, 13, 42, 96, 97, 98, 114, 115, 116, 117, 25.06.20

children with complex medical needs or who were immunocompromised.<sup>216</sup> The policy did not aim to impose fines on parents who opted to keep CV or CEV children at home due to medical advice or health concerns, once the legal obligation to attend school was reinstated in Autumn 2020.<sup>217</sup>

- 5.62. This approach to the attendance of CV and CEV children in school sought to balance the risks of COVID-19 infection with the adverse impacts on missed education and wellbeing, while taking into account the latest scientific advice. When the advice changed, the government responded accordingly - for example in the build-up to the second lockdown in November 2020, the CTF and No.10 were advised by DCMO that CEV children should not attend school and that this would be reflected in guidance. An exchange of views between CTF, DfE and DHSC followed, prior to the guidance being reviewed by No.10.<sup>218,219</sup>

#### Leicester

- 5.63. COVID-O on 29 June 2020, chaired by the Prime Minister, agreed a package of local measures to manage the outbreak of the virus in Leicester. One proposed measure was closing schools in Leicester to help contain the spread of the virus. It was recognised that reversing the planned easing of restrictions in the area might lead some schools spontaneously to close, whereas a proactive decision by the Government to close schools in Leicester would bring clarity to educational settings and underline the seriousness of the local lockdown. However, concern was expressed at the meeting that this decision should not detract from the Government's clear messaging about the importance of returning children to school in September. Moreover, the Committee did not wish to create an expectation that schools would close in the event of future local lockdowns.<sup>220</sup>
- 5.64. Concluding the meeting, the Prime Minister stated that the Government would not adopt a generalised approach to school closures and that these would only take place where there was a strict epidemiological need to do so. Due to the particular circumstances prevailing in Leicester, COVID-O agreed to close schools in the area for 2 weeks.<sup>221</sup> The Health Secretary made an announcement the same day.<sup>222</sup> The closure of schools in Leicester took effect from 2 July 2020 for most children, with the exception of vulnerable children, children with SEND and the children of key workers. These children (and their parents) were permitted to travel

---

<sup>216</sup> JF/238 - INQ000588609 Press Release: Majority of children no longer need to shield 06.07.20

<sup>217</sup> JF/239 - INQ000622798: Q&A on shielding announcement (paras 115-116) 18.6.20

<sup>218</sup> JF/240 - INQ000622802: Email: CEV guidance - position of children 03.11.20

<sup>219</sup> JF/241 - INQ000622801: No.10 Email: Advice to CEV children on school 01.11.20

<sup>220</sup> JF/242 - INQ000088764: Minutes, Covid-O 29.06.20

<sup>221</sup> JF/243 - INQ000088759: Decisions and Actions, Covid-O 29.06.20

<sup>222</sup> JF/244 - INQ000546754: DfE Statement - Leicester Coronavirus Lockdown 30.06.20

into or out of the affected area to enable them to attend school.<sup>223</sup> It was made clear that schools would not reopen until the following term.

- 5.65. On 16 July 2020, COVID-O discussed whether to relax restrictions on education in Leicester, as recommended by the Health Secretary.<sup>224</sup> DHSC advice highlighted a reduction in positive cases and hospital admissions, although the level of infection remained significantly higher than the next highest local authority area. In light of the epidemiological position the Gold Local Action Committee recommended the limited easing of restrictions across Leicester, which included reversing restrictions on early years, schools and FE. In practice this would mostly relate to early years childcare provision as school holidays had started.
- 5.66. In respect of early years and schools, the benefits of lifting restrictions were identified as improved outcomes for children and the mitigation of risk of permanent closure and insufficient childcare places in the future. The risk of taking the action was deemed to be low parental confidence of safety in settings, leading to low demand despite the relaxation.<sup>225</sup> COVID-O agreed to the relaxation of measures in Leicester, which took effect from 24 July 2020.<sup>226</sup>

#### Planning for the return of schools in September

- 5.67. On 15 July 2020, a COVID-O (Officials) meeting took place, to prepare for and resolve cross-cutting issues ahead of the ministerial COVID-S and COVID-O meetings the following day. School contingency planning, school transport, and HE for September were subject to scrutiny, resulting in commissions for DfE and DfT to provide additional clarity on their assessments, proposals, and funding arrangements.
- 5.68. On 16 July 2020, a meeting of COVID-S was immediately followed by a meeting of COVID-O (see paragraph 5.61). COVID-S, chaired by the Prime Minister, was convened to discuss a paper titled 'The Next Chapter in Our Plan to Rebuild' produced by the Permanent Secretary at No.10 which built upon the Plan published on 11 May 2020.<sup>227</sup> The 'next chapter' addressed the Government's approach to planning and preparing for a range of challenges that winter would present. It stated that in September 2020, schools, nurseries and colleges would be open for all children on a full time basis, with protective measures in place, and universities were also working to reopen as fully as possible. It was noted that public

---

<sup>223</sup> JF/245 - INQ000083864: Equality Analysis 03.07.20

<sup>224</sup> JF/246 - INQ000088773: Minutes, Covid-O 16.07.20

<sup>225</sup> JF/247 - INQ000088824: Paper - Review of the Leicester Outbreak Measures (DHSC) 15.07.20

<sup>226</sup> JF/246 - INQ000088773 Minutes, Covid-O 16.07.20; JF/248 - INQ000062424 Actions and Decisions, 16.07.20

<sup>227</sup> JF/249 - INQ000088282: Paper - COVID-19 The Next Chapter in our Plan to Rebuild (No.10) 16.07.20; JF/250 - INQ000137239: The Next Chapter in our Plan to Rebuild The UK Government's Covid-19 Recovery Strategy 17.07.20

compliance with health behaviour messaging would be critical to keeping the virus under control as the economy and schools were reopened.<sup>228</sup>

- 5.69. On 17 July 2020, the Prime Minister set out the Government's approach to managing the spread of the virus, which was shifting from national measures to more targeted, local action. The Prime Minister announced new powers for local authorities to act quickly during outbreaks<sup>229</sup> and reiterated the intention to open all schools, nurseries and colleges. Universities were to reopen as fully as possible. Soft play areas were to remain closed.
- 5.70. At a Cabinet meeting on 21 July 2020, COVID-19 winter preparedness was discussed. The number of cases in the UK had remained flat and the number of hospital admissions had fallen. The CMO explained, however, that if the return of schools in September 2020 was accompanied by a significant seasonal surge in coronavirus, the Government would need to consider further measures. The Prime Minister stated that he did not wish to put the UK back into a national lockdown. There were now different techniques that could be used to suppress the virus, and much more was understood about the progress of the virus and possible responses. However, a national lockdown was still an option if circumstances meant that it was the most effective means of suppressing the virus.<sup>230</sup>
- 5.71. By 22 July 2020, contingency planning was well underway and COVID-S was held to discuss this as well as progress against the roadmap. The plan for schools included work to be undertaken over the summer, the response to any increase in infections, the triggers for any such response, and proposed options in the event of a near-term increase in infection.<sup>231</sup> The CTF provided an update on contingency planning which highlighted that the delivery of the roadmap should proceed, subject to prevalence of the virus remaining around or below the current levels. Where infection rates increased, the CONTAIN framework would be used to determine whether the issue could be managed locally or required wider intervention and whether it was necessary to reach any decision on any nationally introduced measures.<sup>232</sup> During the discussion it was noted that a local approach should be taken for as long as possible, before reverting to a national approach to imposing measures.<sup>233</sup>
- 5.72. At COVID-O on 22 July 2020, following the direction from COVID-S that everything be done to ensure everyone returned to educational settings from September 2020, ministers discussed and agreed the approach, measures and contingency plan to support the return. This included a school transport plan to enable a full return to school in September 2020, a

<sup>228</sup> JF/251 - INQ000088247: Brief, 16.07.20; JF/252 - INQ000088249: Minutes, Covid-S 16.07.20

<sup>229</sup> JF/253 - INQ000234406: Prime Minister's Statement on Coronavirus 17.07.20

<sup>230</sup> JF/254 - INQ000088881: Minutes, Cabinet 21.07.20

<sup>231</sup> JF/255 - INQ000088290: Agenda, Covid-S 22.07.20; JF/256 - INQ000088288 Brief Covid-S 22.07.20

<sup>232</sup> JF/257 - INQ000088291: Paper - Update on Contingency Planning (No.10) 22.07.20

<sup>233</sup> JF/258 - INQ000088251: Minutes, Covid-S 22.07.20

school contingency plan for early years, schools and colleges should the wider public health situation not allow for full school attendance, and a plan for HE provision in September 2020. Papers in respect of each topic were provided to the Committee for discussion, and the CTF advised CDL on the cross cutting issues, highlighting where departments needed to be probed further and where plans needed to be aligned and stress-tested. The minutes and actions for this meeting are exhibited.<sup>234</sup>

- 5.72.1. The **school transport** advice provided by DfE<sup>235</sup> sought agreement on the plan for school transport including funding for the procurement of extra coaches, communications to promote active travel, and guidance that DfE intended to publish that week. The paper emphasised the responsibility of local authorities for implementation, oversight, and bridging the significant capacity gap, however, the CTF noted in its briefing to CDL that it was not clear that local authorities had the capability to perform the cross-modal, cross-sector analysis and planning required.<sup>236</sup> A better understanding of issues, risks and readiness at a local level and support of local authorities was required. It was noted in discussion that the Regional Education and Children's Teams (REACT) and local resilience forums would collect and continue to share information with DfE.
- 5.72.2. The Minister of State for School Standards noted that DfE's planned approach was to increase transport capacity and encourage a shift in travel to other modes such as active travel or car. A communication campaign would be necessary to promote active travel and to reassure parents that measures taken to minimise risk on transport were sufficient. The Minister highlighted that agreement on funding needed to be reached and announced quickly so that operators could be engaged and prepared for September. £148 million for 5,000 additional coaches and £200 million to support the existing fleet of 12,000 coaches was required. DfE, HMT and DfT were in discussion on funding, rail and bus capacity. Guidance was to be issued on protective measures on home to school transport to enable safe transport with increased capacity.

---

<sup>234</sup> JF/259 - INQ000088791: Minutes, Covid-O 22.07.20; JF/260 - INQ000088774 Actions and Decisions Covid-O 22.07.20

<sup>235</sup> JF/261 - INQ000088768: Paper - Schools and FE Colleges Preparing for Autumn Term (DfE) 21.07.20

<sup>236</sup> JF/262 - INQ000088828 Brief, Covid-O 22.07.20

- 5.72.3. DfE's **contingency plan for early years, schools and FE**<sup>237</sup> - which had been requested by COVID-O on 25 June 2020<sup>238</sup> - proposed a fallback model to enable some continued face to face education in the event of a resurgence of COVID-19 transmissions, noting the educational and wellbeing benefits of face-to-face education, as well as the strong support expressed in the SAGE Children's Task & Finish Group paper (see paragraph 6.41). It also proposed a remote education plan for students required to self-isolate or shield and for circumstances where it would not be possible for full face-to-face teaching to take place.
- 5.72.4. The fallback model provided that primary school children, vulnerable children, children of key workers and children in alternative provision would continue to attend school full time, with a system of control in place. All other secondary school children would access full time education but on a rota system of two weeks in school, followed by two weeks remote learning. Further work would need to be done to establish whether other disadvantaged children would continue to attend school full-time and whether wrap-around breakfast and after-school clubs could be provided for primary schools. While it was not possible to advise on the exact circumstances in which the fallback model would need to be invoked, scientific advice supported prioritising full reopening of schools and suggested that reduction in face-to-face delivery should be a last resort and only if absolutely necessary, in the context of the wider set of measures available to reduce transmission in the case of a severe resurgence in COVID-19.
- 5.72.5. The effectiveness of the model would also be partially determined by the extent of social distancing measures in the wider population. For example, if children extensively mixed outside rota groups outside school this would reduce the effectiveness of the model. The paper outlined the educational, welfare and safeguarding benefits of maintaining as much face-to-face school attendance as possible for each of the above student groups. The model for early years and FE (16-19 colleges) would be different to reflect the lower rate of transmission in very young children and the complexity of the FE system.

---

<sup>237</sup> JF/263 - INQ000088771: Paper - Department for Education September Contingency Plan (DfE) 21.07.20

<sup>238</sup> JF/232 - INQ000088754: Actions and Decisions, Covid-O 25.06.20

- 5.72.6. The risks and challenges associated with the fallback model were explored, including the lead-in time for implementation being an estimated 3 to 4 weeks for schools. The central message was still that schools must plan for full reopening in September. Presenting the plan as a fallback for local lockdowns rather than an alternative for September would achieve this aim. Consideration was given to delaying the start of the Autumn term in the event of a late August decision to implement the contingency plan, due to the reduced staffing levels in education over the summer.
- 5.72.7. In guidance published in July, DfE set out how this should be achieved, including the need for contingency plans in case of local outbreaks or individual self-isolation. This included an expectation on schools and colleges to have remote learning contingency plans in place. The lead in time for the switch to remote learning was expected to be around one to two weeks. The limited ability to enforce remote learning was also noted, given the law on mandatory education applied only to physical attendance.
- 5.72.8. DHSC and DfE, working with DCMS on digital connectivity, were to give further consideration to mitigating the impacts on children that were CEV by making sure that CEV and other disadvantaged children had devices and internet access for remote learning. DfE had, at this point, provided 200,000 devices and 50,000 4G routers. 132,500 additional devices had been procured for priority year groups. DfE estimated a further 160,000 disadvantaged children would need devices, and it would take at least 12 weeks and further funding to procure this. Other measures such as free school meals and SEN support were also being considered. If appropriate measures could not be implemented, then catch up provisions would need to be considered. The Minister for Education stated that ensuring the quality of remote teaching was critical. In this regard, DfE was considering issuing a direction to schools on the provision of remote teaching and Ofsted would be looking at this as part of its assurance visits in the Autumn term.
- 5.72.9. DfE also provided advice on the return of **Higher Education**<sup>239</sup>, which recommended that the Government should encourage and enable HE providers to reopen as fully as possible in September 2020, and should clearly communicate guidance on reopening, highlighting the ability of HE

---

<sup>239</sup> JF/264 - INQ000088770: Paper - DfE approach to HE Sector Planning 21.07.2020

providers to open safely in the Autumn. The paper noted plans for a HE-focused subgroup of SAGE to develop further guidance for the sector, for instance on working with Local Authorities and on planning for changes to regional and national alert levels. The committee agreed DfE's plan for implementing additional guidance, but requested a review meeting be held by early September to take stock of the latest situation.<sup>240</sup>

Further work on contingency planning against the backdrop of rising incidence

- 5.73. A COVID-O meeting on 30 July 2020, chaired by the Prime Minister, was held to discuss and agree additional proposed measures to tackle rising incidence of COVID-19 and whether to proceed with reopenings planned in the roadmap for no earlier than 1 August 2020. The Prime Minister described the numbers as heading in the wrong direction, with average daily cases having risen from 1,700 a fortnight earlier to 2,800 the previous week and now standing at 4,200. It appeared that the 'R' was above one.<sup>241</sup> Local areas of concern that would be subject to increased restrictions and targeted testing included Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire (Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees), East Lancashire (Pendle, Hyndburn, Burnley, Rossendale, Blackburn with Darwen) and Leicester.<sup>242</sup> The Gold Local Action Committee provided an update and made recommendations on various measures to address the rise in incidence. Although there was a recommendation to extend mandatory facemasks to a greater number of indoor settings, this recommendation did not extend to schools and some other settings.<sup>243</sup>
- 5.74. In discussion it was noted that it was likely there would be a lull in the death rate despite the increase in infections, as many current infections were among younger, lower-risk people. Looking ahead there were three points that would favour the virus: current plans to open more parts of the economy that weekend, schools and universities returning in September, and the winter season. A significant infection surveillance operation - testing of asymptomatic people at schools - was planned for September 2020. COVID-O agreed to delay the relaxations of measures originally planned for 1 August by at least two weeks. The Government remained resolved, however, to getting schools back in September, to tackle the injustices arising from children missing their education.<sup>244</sup>

---

<sup>240</sup> JF/260 - INQ000088774: Actions and Decisions, Covid-O 22.07.2020

<sup>241</sup> JF/265 - INQ000088797: Minute Covid-O 30.07.20

<sup>242</sup> JF/266 - INQ000088833: Actions and Decisions, Covid-O 30.07.20

<sup>243</sup> JF/267 - INQ000062461: Paper - Update from Gold Local Action Committee (DHSC) 30.07.20; JF/268 - INQ000062459: Paper - Next steps (No 10) 30.07.20

<sup>244</sup> JF/265 - INQ000088797: Minutes, Covid-O 30.07.20

- 5.75. COVID-S, chaired by the Prime Minister, met on 6 August 2020 to consider the final version of DfE's September Return Update paper<sup>245</sup> and a tabletop set of scenarios presented by the CTF.<sup>246</sup> The former provided a progress update on the implementation of plans for a return to full-time, on-site education in September, including agreed contingency plans in the event of high rates of COVID-19 transmission building over August 2020.
- 5.76. The Prime Minister set out that he wanted all pupils to return to school in September 2020 and outlined some of the steps the Government would take to achieve this, including a media plan to create a sense of inevitability around going back to school.<sup>247</sup>
- 5.77. DfE's paper highlighted that since the publication of its guidance in July 2020, the education sector had been preparing for a return to full-time on-site provision and mandatory school attendance from September 2020, with contingency plans for local lockdowns involving high-quality remote education. The paper outlined the substantial operational risks requiring cross government solutions that remained, including parental and teacher confidence, transport and the implementation of local lockdowns. However, DfE was of the view that these risks should not prevent the full reopening of schools in September 2020. The paper set out in detail factors that risked the September plan and ongoing actions being taken to minimise impediments to a full return to school: some of these are outlined below.
- 5.78. The projected school transport capacity gap meant there was a significant risk that some students would not be able to routinely travel to school or college and arrive on time. Transport planning would need to assume that 386,000 students would have to adjust their normal travel arrangements. DfE expected to know more about which areas would be worst affected after local authorities had provided more data on 17 August 2020. The existing transport plan was being developed to include the removal of the 1 metre social distancing rule on school dedicated transport. The CMO stated that children sharing school-only transport would not increase the risk of spreading the virus as the children were going to be together when they got to school. Public transport was more challenging because as a general principle, the more that different households and generations mixed, the higher the risk. The GCSA said that evidence on this matter was limited, however, the principles being discussed were right. Where segmenting children by classes or bubbles was not possible, mitigating factors such as the wearing of face coverings on public transport would reduce the risk of spreading the virus. The DfE paper also outlined options under consideration such as local authority funding for school, college and SEN transport, DfT traffic management, active

---

<sup>245</sup> JF/269 - INQ000088303: Agenda, Covid-S 04.08.20; JF/270 - INQ000088256: Paper - September Return Update (DfE) 06.04.20

<sup>246</sup> JF/271 - INQ000088294: Paper - Schools 1A scenarios (C19 Taskforce)

<sup>247</sup> JF/272 - INQ000088257 Minutes, Covid-S 04.08.20

travel campaigns, and staggered or varied start times. A dedicated transport team reporting to DfE and DfT had been set up to monitor transport analysis to inform further support required.

- 5.79. The Prime Minister said that it would take great organisation and an aggressive campaign to get the transport system ready in the four weeks that remained. There should be a viable plan for every child to return to school, including exploring walking and 'cycling buses' or dedicating buses to school transport at peak times. A clear plan was needed to build confidence among parents and teachers. Local authorities should ask parents about their plans for school travel. School was compulsory and any excuses for non-attendance should be addressed. It was for Local Authorities to fine parents if pupils did not attend.
- 5.80. DfE's paper also highlighted that where early years, schools and colleges took decisions to close pursuant to health and safety obligations, the REACT and FE Territorial teams would work with the setting to understand the reasons for closure and provide support in resolving the issue and re-opening. Where the issue had been resolved and the setting refused to reopen, DfE could compel reopening; should this be required, ministerial intervention would take place and as a last resort DfE would seek ministerial approval to direct a setting to open. DfE also sought agreement on a proposed local lockdown hierarchy and DfE's intention to inform secondary schools and colleges that they may need a plan for rotas in the event of some local lockdown scenarios.
- 5.81. The view remained that schools should not be told of this fall-back plan. Instead, the fall-back plan would be shared in the context of a wider communication from PHE or the JBC about imposing local lockdowns generally, with the closure of schools low down the list after restrictions had been reimposed on social and economic activity. The Prime Minister said that restricting education should be a last resort. In the event of local authority school closures, the Government should use its powers to direct schools to open if it had been unable to persuade the local authority to do so. Explicit contingency plan guidance for schools was not to be shared in advance to avoid undermining momentum towards a full reopening.
- 5.82. There were a number of cross-departmental actions (which had been identified at COVID-O on 22 July 2020 (see paragraph 5.68 above and actions exhibited) aimed at ensuring the plan for the reopening of the education sector in September 2020 was on track and that contingency plans were ready to be implemented within a matter of days, if necessary.<sup>248</sup>

---

<sup>248</sup> JF/273 - INQ000546595: Email Actions and Decisions for Covid-O on 22 July 2020 06.08.20

Ongoing work also included the development of a response framework to ensure the government could rapidly respond to emerging issues as required.<sup>249</sup>

- 5.83. On 17 August 2020, the Back to School Safely Campaign was launched by DfE, which formed part of the Government's wider Stay Alert campaign. It emphasised the Government's commitment to doing everything necessary to deliver its national priority of returning all students to school and college in September, 'as it is the best place for their education and wellbeing'. The campaign highlighted the delivery of over £40 million in funding for local transport authorities to create alternative dedicated school transport to alleviate pressure on public transport and over £700 million either provided or pledged to bus and light rail operators to keep services running despite reduced capacity.<sup>250</sup>
- 5.84. On 27 August 2020 the Prime Minister chaired a COVID-O meeting focused on i) school readiness and parent confidence, ii) provision of transport, iii) management of test and trace prioritisation and demand, iv) plans for providing and maintaining high-quality education if local lockdown occurred.<sup>251</sup> DfE observed that 99% of schools were on track with attendance for the first week of their term and that transport no longer posed a significant barrier at national level. Schools data would be provided to the CTF and No.10 through daily SitReps from 1 September 2020. The Prime Minister stated that schools should be the last thing that would be closed when considering measures to contain outbreaks, in keeping with the Government's CONTAIN framework.
- 5.85. DfE guidance on measures was provided to schools to help make sure that they were safe. This included the provision of testing kits, test and trace prioritisation, handwashing, PPE packs, wearing of face masks and management of bubbles. Schools were responsible for delivering and monitoring engagement with remote learning, and quality of remote learning would be monitored by Ofsted visits. Additional support packs for schools were being developed by DfE and Ministers were considering issuing a direction under the Coronavirus Act to give clarity on the duty of schools to provide remote education. Oak Academy resources were made available for free to all schools. 220,000 devices had been distributed to the sector and up to 150,000 more would be available within two working days, for pupils whose education was disrupted. The return to schools was going to be rolled out in stages,

---

<sup>249</sup> JF/274 - INQ000088255: Paper - September Return Update (DfE) 06.08.20

<sup>250</sup> JF/275 - INQ000546750: DfE Statement - Government Campaign Launches to get Children Back to School Safely 16.08.20

<sup>251</sup> JF/276 - INQ000089956: Brief, Covid-O 27.08.20

partly because schools often staggered the arrival of year groups but also because the start of term dates differed across local authorities.<sup>252</sup>

---

<sup>252</sup> JF/277 - INQ000089958: Paper - Readiness for Full Opening of Education Settings in September (DfE) 27.08.20; JF/278 - INQ000089968 Minutes, Covid-O 27.08.20; JF/279 - INQ000090214 Actions and Decisions, Covid-O 27.08.20

## 6. THE FULL RE-OPENING OF SCHOOLS - AUTUMN 2020

### Summary

- 6.1. The vast majority of early years childcare settings, schools and colleges reopened in September 2020, enabled by a host of NPIs to reduce the risk of infection including social distancing, hygiene measures and maintaining 'bubbles'. The reopening took place against a backdrop of rising prevalence of the virus and new laws taking effect on 14 September which restricted indoor and outdoor gatherings of above 6 people.
- 6.2. HE was subject to a significant amount of focus as data showed that new infections were concentrated in younger people. Subsequently policy and communications were developed to mitigate the risks of student mixing and mass testing of students was rolled out to manage the return to their homes for Christmas. Policy work centred on aligning HEI's with local tiered restrictions and making sure that they had robust outbreak plans.
- 6.3. The Cabinet Office undertook analysis on the disproportionate short and long term impacts of COVID-19 on adversely impacted groups, including children and young people - these being particularly acute among ethnic minorities and low income households. The school attendance rates for vulnerable children continued to be monitored closely. By October 2020, data indicated that children's social care referrals were 6% lower than the usual for that time of year, which raised concerns about the risk of 'unseen harms'.
- 6.4. There were improvements to data collection concerning compliance and the quality of remote education being delivered by schools. A targeted approach to supporting schools and colleges with remote education was developed, with Ofsted inspections and spot checks used to drive higher standards. An additional 530,000 devices were procured for disadvantaged children. HE institutions were asked to increase their online provision.
- 6.5. Regarding transmission in schools, evidence had emerged that children and young people played a more limited role in the transmission of COVID-19 than previously understood.<sup>253</sup> The Prime Minister was clear that restrictions on education should be a measure of last resort.
- 6.6. In light of the continued rise of prevalence of COVID-19, the second lockdown came into effect from 5 November 2020. Keeping young people in education continued to be a priority of the Government, therefore early years settings, schools, colleges and universities

---

<sup>253</sup> JF/280 [redacted] SAGE Children's Task and Finish Working Group; Risks associated with reopening of education settings in September. JF/281 [redacted] INQ000075460 SAGE minutes of 46th meeting on 09.07.20 (confirms Children's Task and Finish Working Group paper endorsed subject to update and final ex-committee approval on 10.07.20)

remained open and parents continued to access childcare to enable them to work. In November 2020, plans were developed for 'Christmas bubbles' which would limit social contact to three households. During this period, DfE authored a single contingency framework for schools, simplifying the guidance for education settings to avoid confusion with the Local Covid Alert Levels (LCAL) tiering system, and reflecting the principle that children and young people should remain in full-time education wherever possible. The framework laid out simplified contingency plans for prioritising attendance, and moved responsibility for determining whether to implement restrictions on education to rest with national Government. The revised Contingency Framework was agreed by COVID-O<sup>254</sup> and published on 27 November 2020.<sup>255</sup>

- 6.7. Throughout December 2020, the Cabinet Office coordinated cross-government contingency planning; prioritising schools mass testing from January 2021 and mobilising public sector efforts to improve the school attendance of vulnerable children.

*The reopening of schools and planning the return of higher education*

- 6.8. At a Cabinet meeting on 1 September 2020, the Prime Minister said that 'despite flat or declining rates of deaths and hospital admissions from coronavirus there was no room for complacency. The increase in cases in France, Spain and even Germany was a warning. There was no reason to believe that the UK would be an exception: our case levels were the same as France's infection levels a few weeks earlier. A national lockdown should not be reimposed and schools would not be instructed to close again; the UK had been locked down for longer than any other major country and this had done serious damage to its economy and the educational outcomes of its most disadvantaged children. The best way to avoid a national lockdown would be a successful test and trace system combined with strong local lockdowns when required. Since the spring, scientific progress on treatment for coronavirus meant that better outcomes were expected for those who became infected'. In discussion, the point was made that 'early signs were that pupils were steadily returning to school and that this was being done in a calm, normal way'.<sup>256</sup>
- 6.9. COVID-O on 3 September 2020, chaired by CDL, focussed on the reopening of the HE / University sector with the objective to "secure as full a university experience as possible, with the vital community and personal support, while making sure that it is safe for students, staff and local communities." On 26 August 2020 - following on from the 6 August COVID-O - the CTF had commissioned DfE to review the preparedness of the HEI sector in order to agree

---

<sup>254</sup> JF/282 - INQ000091217: Actions & Decisions, COVID-O 24.11.20

<sup>255</sup> JF/283 - INQ000546791: Guidance - 'Contingency framework: education and childcare settings', (Archived 30.11.20)

<sup>256</sup> JF/284 - INQ000088930: Minutes, Cabinet 01.09.20

further action.<sup>257</sup> As a result, DfE provided advice on a number of cross-cutting issues to facilitate the return of HEIs/universities which were considered at this COVID-O, including their preparations and plans, provisions for mass movement (including for Christmas), face coverings, the testing strategy and student compliance with guidance.<sup>258</sup> The Chair's brief, prepared by the CTF, suggested that CDL should test how DfE were planning on intervening on unprepared or non-compliant institutions, and how they would get HEIs and local partners to engage immediately - especially on outbreak planning as this was likely to be an issue immediately.<sup>259</sup> CDL sought reassurance on the preparedness of HEIs for the safe return of students and commissioned DfE to publish guidance to HEIs, underpinned by SAGE advice.<sup>260</sup> CDL summarised these and the other actions taken by COVID-O in his weekly update to the Prime Minister on 7 September 2020.<sup>261</sup>

6.10. In Cabinet on 8 September 2020, the Prime Minister noted that '99% of schools were back open and the numbers were going up in England'.<sup>262</sup> Later that day, the Prime Minister chaired COVID-S which considered advice from the CTF on the 'Response to Rising Incidence'.<sup>263</sup> Noting the Government's priority remained to keep schools open, the advice set out the recommended response to the rising incidence, characterised as a "double down on the current strategy". This meant more forceful communications, tighter social contact and tougher enforcement. The risk that the recommendations would deter parents from sending children to school was acknowledged and to mitigate this, the Government was to ensure that messaging around the changes emphasise the steps being taken to keep schools open and the significant benefits this had for young people and children. There were plans to work with universities, including through direct communications with Chief Scientists and Clinicians, to make sure: that they were COVID-secure; that they understood the need to retain students even in the face of a local outbreak; and that safer social activities were identified, especially for Freshers Week, that centred on campus and away from city/town centres.

6.11. On 17 September 2020, a COVID-O meeting assigned an action to DHSC to work with DfE to ensure that testing guidance for schools was communicated clearly and repeatedly. It also decided to extend the testing prioritisation order to all teaching staff, including teaching assistants.<sup>264</sup>

<sup>257</sup> JF/285 - INQ000546592: Email re 'September HE Readiness' commission (CTF to DfE) 26.08.20

<sup>258</sup> JF/286 - INQ000090217: Slides - 'HE Re-opening Update for COVID-O' (DfE) 03.09.20

<sup>259</sup> JF/287 - INQ000090216: Chair's Brief, COVID-O 03.09.20

<sup>260</sup> JF/288 - INQ000090179: Minutes, COVID-O 03.09.20

<sup>261</sup> JF/289 - INQ000226641: CDL Weekly Note to PM 07.09.20

<sup>262</sup> JF/290 - INQ000088964: Minutes, 07.09.20

<sup>263</sup> JF/291 - INQ000088297: Paper - Response to Rising Incidence; JF/292 - INQ000218347: Minutes, COVID-S 08.09.20

<sup>264</sup> JF/293 - INQ000090225: Actions & Decisions, COVID-O 17.09.20; see also JF/294 - INQ000226643: CDL Weekly Note to PM 20.09.20

- 6.12. The Dashboard provided to COVID-S on 21 September 2020<sup>265</sup> showed that: the attendance rate at fully open schools was 88% and that – although it was an early stage – attendance appeared to be levelling off at this rate; the number of schools closed increased by seven (23 to 30) since 16 September 2020; the number of schools that sent some bubbles/year groups home increased by 157; and the number of schools affected by COVID-19 remained small but increasing (3.7% to 4.5% of 21,500 schools). The Prime Minister noted the acute situation in relation to cases of COVID-19 and acknowledged public fatigue with restrictions with people - particularly young people - having become too relaxed about measures including social distancing. The committee agreed to move to alert level 4 in England and to implement a package of measures, presented by the CTF,<sup>266</sup> which had been designed to change public behaviour whilst keeping children and students in education.
- 6.13. COVID-O on 21 September 2020, chaired by CDL, discussed a winter package. Advice from the CTF noted work to make clear that university students should remain at their university in the event of an outbreak, although it was noted in the equality considerations (Annex E to the paper), that this could impact some young people's wellbeing. The CTF intended to continue to exempt formal/supervised children (including wraparound childcare) and all organised activities for under 18s from the rule of six introduced on 14 September 2020. The transmission risk created by intermingling between children in different bubbles at school was highlighted, however, the continued exemption was designed to ensure – in line with broader education policy – that children and young people were not disadvantaged any further in terms of socialisation and development. The CTF further recommended a new exemption, to take effect from 24 September 2020, to enable informal childcare where necessary, that would not cover children simply gathering socially in households.<sup>267</sup> COVID-O agreed to the package of measures proposed by the CTF. In the course of discussion it was noted that the new proposals on mandatory facemasks would increase the pressure for similar measures to be introduced in schools, but in summing up CDL said that there was no reason why the mandation of face coverings should apply to staff in schools.<sup>268</sup>
- 6.14. At a Cabinet meeting on 22 September 2020, it was noted by various attendees that it was vital that schools and universities remained open and any extension of school holidays would be problematic in terms of getting children back to school again.<sup>269</sup>

---

<sup>265</sup> JF/295 - INQ000088300: Paper - 'COVID-S Briefing Dashboard'

<sup>266</sup> JF/296 - INQ000088299: Paper - 'Winter Strategy' (COVID-19 Task Force) 21.09.20 ; JF/297 - INQ000088270: Actions and Decisions, COVID-S, 21.09.20; JF/298 - INQ000088271: Minutes, COVID-S 21.09.20

<sup>267</sup> JF/299 - INQ000234025: Paper – COVID-19: Winter Package Implementation (COVID-19 Task Force)

<sup>268</sup> JF/300 - INQ000090182: Minutes, COVID-O 21.09.20; JF/301 - INQ000090043: Actions & Decisions, COVID-O, 21.09.20

<sup>269</sup> JF/302 - INQ000089060: Minutes, Cabinet 22.09.20

6.15. A CRIP<sup>270</sup> prepared by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat was provided for a COBR meeting on 22 September 2020.

6.15.1. On schools, it noted that: i) attendance in fully open schools and colleges for vulnerable children was lower than usual following schools re-opening in September; ii) overall attendance in schools decreased over the end of the previous week but appeared to be rising again with attendance rates for vulnerable children remaining between 79- 85%; iii) an increasing number of schools were having to partially close for COVID-related reasons, meaning vulnerable children in bubbles sent home would not attend school; and iv) the expected rise in CSC referrals had started and was likely to continue to rise following the return of schools.

6.15.2. In respect of HEIs it was noted in the paper that: i) 80% of universities will have opened by the end of the week and the remainder would open in the following two weeks; ii) it was expected HEIs would combine online teaching and in-person tuition in ways that they considered appropriate and which minimised risk; iii) a communications strategy had been implemented to ensure students adhered to Covid secure practices on and off campus; and iv) 100% of high and medium risk providers had outbreak plans which were agreed with local Directors of Public Health.

6.16. A further paper indicated that infections – at that time – were concentrated among young people.<sup>271</sup> In the meeting, the Prime Minister stated that the winter package was intended to do minimal harm to the economy and education whilst impacting the virus.<sup>272</sup>

6.17. The CTF convened regular Return to School ‘Gold’ meetings between September 2020 and January 2021 to cover issues relevant to the return of schools and universities. These meetings were later adapted into the Education Gold meeting series. A ‘Return to Schools Gold Meeting’ was convened on 23 September 2020 with a focus on schools’ management of COVID-19 cases. The actions from the Gold included:<sup>273</sup>

6.17.1. CTF to convene an urgent meeting with DfE and DHSC on the allocation of 41,000 residual test kits, and schedule deep dives on school attendance and remote education for future Gold meetings.

---

<sup>270</sup> JF/303 - INQ000083796: Paper - CRIP 21.09.20

<sup>271</sup> JF/304 - INQ000083802: Paper – Response to Current Situation 22.09.20

<sup>272</sup> JF/305 - INQ000083849: Minutes, COBR 22.09.20

<sup>273</sup> JF/306 - INQ000546721: Email - Actions, Return to School Gold 23.09.20

- 6.17.2. DHSC to share data with DfE and CTF on the number of children tested and the proportion positive.
  - 6.17.3. DfE to ensure new messaging on rules regarding isolation was directed to parents and schools.
- 6.18. COVID-O on 24 September 2020<sup>274</sup> focused on the disproportionate short and long term impacts of COVID-19 on adversely impacted groups, including children and young people. Analysis by the Taskforce and the SRO for Disproportionately Impacted Groups<sup>275</sup> pointed to the following impacts, as relevant to children and young people:
- 6.18.1. Economic: Prolonged youth unemployment from COVID-19 risked 'scarring' including future episodes of unemployment.
  - 6.18.2. Physical health: Young people's risk of poor physical health may increase as a result of the economic downturn and difficulty accessing health services.
  - 6.18.3. Mental health: Young people had increasingly reported experiencing loneliness and depression.
  - 6.18.4. Social: COVID-19 would likely increase existing education inequalities; young people had been particularly affected by school closures.
- 6.19. The paper also described how these impacts on young people were particularly acute among ethnic minorities and low income households. It recommended a package of measures to combat disproportionate impacts. The package included the funding of a Community Champions scheme, including communications support for councils; grassroots advocates and helplines for affected communities; and extra funding and expert support from government, which could be used by impacted groups to implement interventions to improve health outcomes. Other measures included, but were not limited to: support for businesses with high numbers of employees from disproportionately impact groups, and mandatory data collection on protected characteristics of Covid-19 patients.
- 6.20. COVID-O agreed to the proposals set out in the paper, and set actions for the Minister for Equalities, to submit a report on disparity of outcomes, and the Taskforce, to ensure that decisions on future interventions fully factored in the likely impacts on Disproportionately Impacted Groups. The committee also agreed on the importance of community champions,

---

<sup>274</sup> JF/307 - INQ000090183: Minutes, COVID-O 24.09.20

<sup>275</sup> JF/308 - INQ000053842: Paper – Disproportionality Impacted Groups (SRO and CTF); JF/309 - INQ000090047: Paper – 'ANNEX A: COVID-19 Impacts on Particular Groups of the Population', 24.09.20

and requested that Government guidance and communications packages be proactively shared with stakeholder networks so they could be tailored to different audiences.

6.21. COVID-O on 28 September 2020, chaired by CDL, focussed on the rapid assessment of options to reduce the rate of infections in HE settings, based on the following assessment:

- 6.21.1. Almost 90% of students had returned to campuses;
- 6.21.2. The portion of students affected by outbreaks was low. All universities had plans to manage outbreaks and 80% of these outbreak plans had been agreed or were on track to be agreed with local Directors of Public Health. Anecdotal evidence had shown universities were managing outbreaks well.
- 6.21.3. The response should not single out students but implement a community-wide approach addressing the position of students in the wider community.
- 6.21.4. Stopping face-to-face tuition entirely and closing universities would have severe impacts on universities, student well-being, and cost implications on UK and International student fees.
- 6.21.5. The Education Secretary was working closely with NHST&T to support testing at universities. DfE was proposing a four-tiered approach to controlling transmission at universities.
- 6.21.6. There was little the Government could do to stop students from returning home for Christmas. The Government should signal its intention to allow students to return home for Christmas and the steps it was taking to ensure this could happen safely.
- 6.21.7. Treating students in line with the wider population and not introducing targeted measures was the right approach.<sup>276</sup>

6.22. There were a number of cross-departmental actions arising from COVID-O on 28 September 2020, which included establishing how the restrictions related to HEI's should align with local tiered restrictions, applying lessons learned from the multi-agency approach to local lockdowns to universities; mitigations in preparation for the mass movement of students at Christmas; and ensuring HEI's outbreak plans had been signed off by local Directors of Public Health and the data provided to the CTF.<sup>277</sup> Decisions from the meeting included that:

---

<sup>276</sup> JF/310 - INQ000090175: Minutes, COVID-O 28.09.20

<sup>277</sup> JF/311 - INQ000062690: Actions & Decisions, COVID-O 28.09.20

- 6.22.1. HEIs should remain open with additional measures recommended;
  - 6.22.2. Disproportionate measures targeted at students should not be introduced but students should be considered as part of the wider community; and
  - 6.22.3. The approach proposed by DfE on planning for students to return home for Christmas was agreed, with DfE commissioned to work with the CTF and No.10 on its detailed implementation. This included working with HEIs to ensure the end-of-term timetable enabled those testing positive to self-isolate before returning home in time for Christmas, and keeping under review the potential need for exemptions from local or national regulations. DfE were further commissioned to engage with the Devolved Administrations to discuss the approach ahead of statements being made on 29 September.
- 6.23. As agreed at COVID-O, the Education Secretary made an oral statement in the House on 29 September 2020<sup>278</sup> setting out the Government's position on Christmas arrangements for HEI students.
- 6.24. A 'Return to Schools Gold Meeting' was convened on 30 September 2020 by the CTF to coordinate cross-government activity. Officials from DfE, MHT, DfT, PHE and DHSC attended to review the latest data and agree actions. The weekly DfE and CTF SitRep showed that:<sup>279</sup>
- 6.24.1. as of 28 September 2020 overall attendance had levelled out at between 86% and 89%; in state funded special schools it was 80%; in alternative provision it was 58%;
  - 6.24.2. the rate of increase in schools with pupil groups isolating had slowed but action was ongoing to support schools to manage cases, given nationwide COVID incidence.
- 6.25. The key actions arising were for DfE to share attendance figures that included pupils learning remotely with the CTF and No.10 and for DfE and the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit to share a view on what constitutes good attendance rates.<sup>280</sup> This work was taken forward, and the Prime Minister was kept updated on progress<sup>281</sup>. There were a range of other actions including in respect of further analysis, and access to testing.

<sup>278</sup> JF/312 - INQ000546768: Statement to Parliament - 'Return of students to universities' 29.09.20

<sup>279</sup> JF/313 - INQ000542578: Paper – 'DfE/Taskforce Meeting SitRep' 30.09.20

<sup>280</sup> JF/314 - INQ000546715: Email with actions from Return to Schools Meeting on 30.09.20

<sup>281</sup> JF/315 - INQ000546819: Paper - 'Attendance data and analysis', 29.10.20

- 6.26. DfE issued a Remote Education Temporary Continuity (No. 2) Direction<sup>282</sup> on 1 October 2020, extending the requirement on schools to provide remote education for state-funded pupils that could not attend school due to COVID-19.

*The development of the tiering system in England*

- 6.27. Following the decision by COVID-S on 21 September 2020 to adopt a new local alert levels approach to implementing social distancing measures, COVID-O (Officials) met on 5 October 2020 to discuss the substance and timing of the new approach. DHSC advice presented the rationale that standardising local interventions would bring greater consistency and clarity and to improve compliance. As a result of confusion about the scope of existing restrictions, DfE had observed lower attendance at schools in areas affected by local interventions. Although the new tiered approach would not apply any restrictions on attendance at schools, colleges or universities, it was proposed that this decision would be kept under review. Measures relating to childcare, playgroups and youth clubs were proposed at Annex B of the paper.<sup>283</sup> DHSC was asked to clarify these terms, as well as the policy relating to childcare and the proposal to implement childcare bubbles for under 14s.<sup>284</sup>
- 6.28. The local alert levels strategy was then reviewed at a COVID-O on 5 October 2020, chaired by CDL. In a revised paper, which was circulated in advance of the meeting, it was recommended that both educational and childcare settings would remain open under the new tiered approach. It was noted that further work was required in collaboration with other departments to define terms such as childcare. At Annex B, the updated paper proposed that an additional exemption to the rule of 6 would be added at tier 1 to allow contact between birth families and children in care. It also proposed to permit supervised childcare in private homes.<sup>285</sup>
- 6.29. On HEI's, further clarity was needed in relation to students, such as whether to permit students to return home when under tier 2 or tier 3 restrictions if their mental health required it, and allowing them to maintain a bubble within their familial households. It was suggested that a robust line on Christmas needed to be prepared and DfE was commissioned to consider whether students should be permitted to bubble with their parental households.<sup>286</sup>

---

<sup>282</sup> JF/316 - INQ000546777: Guidance - 'Remote Education Temporary Continuity (No.2) Direction: explanatory note' 01.10.20

<sup>283</sup> JF/317 - INQ000090066: Paper - 'Local Alert Level Strategy: Social Distancing Measures' 05.10.20

<sup>284</sup> JF/318 - INQ000090245: Actions, COVID-O 02.10.20

<sup>285</sup> JF/319 - INQ000090068: Paper - 'Local Risk Levels' (SSHSC) 05.10.20

<sup>286</sup> JF/320 - INQ000090081: Minutes, COVID-O 05.10.20; JF/321 - INQ000090071: Actions and Decisions COVID-O 05.10.20

- 6.30. On 7 October 2020, a Gold meeting was convened by CTF to discuss provision of remote education.<sup>287</sup> DfE reported that it was taking steps to improve the collation of data and intelligence concerning compliance and the quality of remote education being delivered by schools. It was also taking action to develop a targeted, tiered approach to supporting schools and colleges in the provision of remote education by prioritising high-risk areas and quickly developing targeted interventions. DfE confirmed that it was investing in an additional 530,000 laptops and tablets to ensure that all disadvantaged children could obtain access to a device.<sup>288</sup>
- 6.31. On the topic of school attendance, it was noted that the number of schools with groups of pupils isolating was still increasing but at a reduced rate. There remained a heightened concern in the northwest and northeast due to the number of positive cases in those areas. DfE's data indicated a slight increase in the rates of pupil attendance since early September and a narrowing of the attendance gap for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and Free School Meals (FSM) pupils. The SitRep identified actions and mitigations being taken by DfE to improve the attendance rates of vulnerable children. These included making targeted "REACT" calls to local authorities with the lowest attendance rates for vulnerable children. It also included updates on attendance at and engagement with early years provision, FE and HE. The SitRep also noted the work of CTF field teams, which had been regularly reviewing university preparedness<sup>289</sup> to support the creation of up-to-date guidance and measures for these institutions.
- 6.32. The actions arising from the Gold meeting including the sharing of information with No.10 and the CTF about remote education and international comparators, the use of Ofsted inspections and spot checks to drive high standards in provision of remote education and actions to encourage schools to use the autumn half-term to assess remote education and lost learning.<sup>290</sup> The Taskforce and DfE were also asked to work on a further response to the commission for this meeting, and this work was presented at COVID-O on 23 October.<sup>291</sup>
- 6.33. Following a severe outbreak of COVID-19 in the Merseyside area, a further COVID-O was held on 11 October 2020 to discuss the local alert levels strategy. Advice from the CTF showed that the incidence of the virus was rapidly rising, which included recommendations to

---

<sup>287</sup> JF/322 - INQ000546714: Email - 'Remote Education Commission: deadline 7 October' (CTF) 01.10.20; JF/323 - INQ000540941: Email confirming meeting of Return to Schools Gold (CTF) 07.10.20

<sup>288</sup> JF/324 - INQ000542575: DfE weekly SitRep 07.10.20

<sup>289</sup> For instance: JF/325 - INQ000546816: CTF Field Teams weekly update 11.09.20

<sup>290</sup> JF/326 - INQ000546720: Actions, Return to Schools Gold 07.10.20

<sup>291</sup> JF/327 - INQ000546596: Email Commission from C-19 Secretariat to DfE 09.10.20; JF/328 - INQ000090128: Paper - 'Schools Update for COVID-O' 23.10.20

the Committee on the three tiers which would be applied in each geographical area, together with the policies and guidance to be applied in each tier.<sup>292</sup>

- 6.34. The new policy proposed by the CTF for very high risk (i.e. Level 3) areas was underpinned by a desire to engage with local leaders and to tailor the restrictions to the needs of the local area. The policy, therefore, envisaged that there would be flexibility for local areas to impose tougher restrictions than the baseline measures mandated by national government. However, the discretion to be afforded to local leaders would not extend to implementing the closure of schools or universities.
- 6.35. Moreover, the CTF proposed that certain exceptions be made to the baseline measures at levels 2 and 3 in the interests of children and young people. For example, it was recommended that support or childcare bubbles be excluded from the general prohibition at Level 2 on household mixing indoors. Additionally, the paper suggested that all forms of under-18 supervised youth and children's activities should be permitted at Level 3 to prevent any unintentional loss of childcare provision.
- 6.36. As for restrictions on travel, the CTF proposed issuing clear guidance that travel in or out of a Level 3 area would be permitted for work, education, youth services or caring responsibilities. University students living away from home were to be treated in the same way as others residing in an area subject to Level 2 or Level 3 restrictions with the exception of those who needed to travel from their family home each day to attend university, known as "commuter students". It was recommended that continued travel by commuter students be permitted for educational purposes. The paper noted that guidance was being developed in liaison with the devolved administrations for students wishing to travel home for Christmas.
- 6.37. In discussion, it was acknowledged that the three main routes of transmission were education, work and leisure and that, in developing a strategy to contain the virus, the decision had been taken to protect work and education. As a result, imposing restrictions on leisure was the only remaining lever for the government to pull.<sup>293</sup> COVID-O agreed to the tiered approach and an action was taken for DfE, DHSC and MHCLG to consider the implications of rolling out the new tiered approach for university students seeking to return home for Christmas.<sup>294</sup>
- 6.38. A COBR meeting was convened on 12 October 2020 to ensure a common understanding of the incidence of the virus, to facilitate a swift UK-wide response to the recent increase in transmission of COVID-19 and to deliver clear and consistent messaging about the need for

---

<sup>292</sup> JF/329 - INQ000090091: Paper - Local Alert Levels (CTF) 11.10.20

<sup>293</sup> JF/330 - INQ000090163: Minutes, COVID-O 11.10.20

<sup>294</sup> JF/331 - INQ000090205: Decisions and Actions, COVID-O 11.10.20

a change in behaviour.<sup>295</sup> The meeting was chaired by the Prime Minister and attended by (amongst others) the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Discussion at the meeting was informed by a CRIP produced by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat<sup>296</sup> and the framework for a tiered response to managing local outbreaks in England.<sup>297</sup> The First Minister of Northern Ireland reported that hospital admissions were rising and questioned whether it would be possible to reduce R below 1 without interfering with education. The Prime Minister stated that keeping schools open was a particular point of interest but acknowledged that the success of the local alert levels was dependent on compliance by individuals. The CMO observed that protecting education was best for young people both now and in the future and suggested that further restrictions should be managed consistently with that objective. He reported that SAGE had performed modelling which tended to indicate that primary schools had a relatively low impact on transmission.<sup>298</sup>

- 6.39. Data included in the CRIP indicated that children's social care referrals were 6% lower than the usual number at that time of year, with a risk of 'unseen harms'. For the first time, it was reported that a request had been received from a Local Authority for assistance following a significant rise in referrals to children's social care.
- 6.40. The Return-to-Schools Gold meeting on 14 October 2020 analysed a SitRep by DfE<sup>299</sup>, which observed that attendance rates in schools were stabilising at approximately 90% but that the gap in attendance among BAME and FSM pupils remained greater than recorded pre-COVID. DfE also updated on work undertaken to support the Merseyside region - now subject to Tier 3 measures - including regular contact with trusts and local authorities, and the distribution of 7,300 laptops to the area. Laptops were also being procured to more broadly support disadvantaged Y3 - Y11 students, and those who were shielding. DfE proposed work to better understand the extent to which transmission was driven by children and educational settings, including that it was working with PHE and NHS England to address the needs of vulnerable children receiving medical treatment. In response to the rise in referrals in children's social care, DfE was engaging with the children's social care sector to manage the peak. Following the meeting, the CTF was asked to work with DfE on clarifying decision making within the CONTAIN framework, and to convene a cross-departmental meeting to pull together strands of transmission and outbreak data

---

<sup>295</sup> JF/332 - INQ000083826: Chair's Brief, COBR 12.10.20

<sup>296</sup> JF/333 - INQ000062738: CRIP 30, 11.10.20

<sup>297</sup> JF/334 - INQ000083809: Paper - Local Alert Levels 12.10.20

<sup>298</sup> JF/335 - INQ000083851: Minutes, COBR 12.10.20; JF/336 - INQ000083807: Actions and Decisions, COBR 12.10.20

<sup>299</sup> JF/337 - INQ000546723: Paper - 'DfE/Taskforce Meeting SitRep' 14.10.20

ahead of COVID-O. DfE was also asked to provide the CTF with contingency plans and the implications of enacting them.<sup>300</sup>

- 6.41. On 15 October 2020, SAGE<sup>301</sup> discussed a paper from the Children's Task and Finish Working Group (a SAGE sub-committee) entitled: "Update on transmission and symptoms in children".<sup>302</sup> The paper contained the latest data and analysis about the role of children in transmission, noting that while emerging evidence suggested the role of children and young people in transmission was limited, data was insufficient to draw firm conclusions and there was conflicting evidence on the role of children in household transmission. SAGE discussed and endorsed a revised paper from the CTFG at a further meeting (on the role of children in transmission of Covid-19) on 4 November 2020<sup>303</sup>, and the paper was finalised that day.<sup>304</sup>
- 6.42. The final, endorsed paper from the SAGE Children's Task and Finish Working Group entitled 'Children and transmission' concluded that prevalence rose significantly in secondary school children and young people around the time that schools reopened, but due to other factors - such as mixing outside of the home - it was difficult to establish this as the direct cause.
- 6.43. The SAGE Children's Task and Finish Working Group assessed evidence of the key risks to children and young people and rated its confidence in its conclusions:

6.43.1. There was strong evidence that children and younger people under 18 years were less susceptible to severe clinical disease than older people (high confidence).

6.43.2. There was clear evidence of the negative educational impact of missing school, particularly for younger children and disadvantaged students (high confidence). Vulnerable children were most likely to be affected, with risk of harm and abuse higher due to isolation and financial stress. Even a relatively short period of missed school could have consequences for skill growth, particularly for younger children, given that investments in children's learning tend to be complementary over time. A period of learning at home was likely to reinforce inequalities between children. Extended periods away from school could mean that emerging learning problems were missed by educational psychologists. Additionally, an important minority of students did not have access to devices and the internet.

---

<sup>300</sup> JF/338 - INQ000546708: Email containing Return to Schools Gold actions from 14.10.20

<sup>301</sup> JF/339 - INQ000061570: Readout - SAGE 62, 15.10.20

<sup>302</sup> JF/340 - INQ000314264: Paper - 'October 2020: Update on transmission and symptoms in children' (CTFG)

<sup>303</sup> JF/341 - INQ000197213: Paper - 'Children and transmission' (CTFG) 03.11.20

<sup>304</sup> JF/342 - INQ000546836: Final paper 'Children and transmission' (CTFG, SAGE endorsed) 04.11.20

- 6.43.3. There was evidence that school closures caused impairment to the physical and mental health of children (high confidence). Cognitive, social and emotional developmental outcomes were also at risk (medium confidence).
- 6.44. SAGE advised that any decision must consider the balance of risks and harms: including the potential direct health risks to children and staff from COVID-19 and the wider impact of school opening on community transmission; and the direct risks to student mental health, wellbeing, development, educational attainment and health outcomes from school closure.
- 6.45. In reviewing travel corridors at COVID-O on 15 October 2020, DfT recommended Italy be removed from the travel corridor list for England before school half term commenced in light of a doubling in the weekly incidence rate of the virus and a recent rise in imported cases. A key factor in that recommendation, approved by the Committee, was that if the decision was taken any later students and teachers who travelled to Italy during half term would be required to self-isolate on their return, which would result in further lost time in education.<sup>305</sup>
- 6.46. On 19 October 2020, COVID-O (Officials) met to discuss the measures which should be implemented to enable students safely to return home for Christmas, ahead of a COVID-O meeting on 22 October 2020 (see paragraph 6.49)<sup>306</sup>. In joint advice prepared by the Cabinet Office and DfE<sup>307</sup> which set out the approach to the end of term, it was acknowledged that there was a significant risk of asymptomatic transmission if students were permitted to travel home. SAGE, however, had expressed concern about the effect which lockdown had had upon the students' mental wellbeing. The proposed approach was therefore intended to align with the LCAL - also known as tiers - and to give effect to ministers' commitment to allow students to return home for Christmas.
- 6.47. No additional measures were recommended for students residing in a tier 1 area. At tier 2, a period of 14 days reduced contact would be required. Students living in a tier 3 area would be expected to undertake a period of self-isolation lasting 14 days. Consistent with policy, compliance and clinical considerations, it was proposed that students be entrusted with making an informed decision about whether to perform their period of reduced contact or self-isolation at home or at university. Moreover, steps were being taken by DfE and the Cabinet Office<sup>308</sup> to review and to quality assure the planning in HEIs for outbreaks of the virus. In consultation with PHE and other stakeholders, this work had resulted in the

---

<sup>305</sup> JF/343 - INQ000090107: Paper - 'Weekly review of Travel Corridors' (SST) 15.10.20; JF/344 - INQ000090170: Minutes COVID-O 15.10.20; JF/345 - INQ000090109: Actions and Decisions, COVID-O 15.10.20

<sup>306</sup> JF/346 - INQ000090111: Agenda, COVID-O (Officials) 19.10.20

<sup>307</sup> JF/347 - INQ000090110: Paper - 'Higher Education: Approach to end of term' (CO/DfE) 17.10.20

<sup>308</sup> For instance JF/348 - INQ000546549: Statement of Confidence 'PM Delivery report for HE return', 10.10.20

preparation of best practice guidance<sup>309</sup> which had been issued to universities and Directors of Public Health<sup>310</sup>. To allow for students to travel without breaking restrictions, a need for synergy across the 4 nations was required in both guidance and law.

- 6.48. To ensure that plans were robust, DfE was commissioned to demonstrate a granularity of data on outbreak planning in HEIs, including evidence of improvements made to weaker plans in institutions. In addition, DfE was to clarify the plans being made for January 2021, which needed to take account of educational, economic and wellbeing factors.<sup>311</sup>
- 6.49. COVID-O (Officials) met again on 20 October 2020 to conduct an 'end of term deep dive' on schools, in preparation for COVID-O on 23 October 2020. The meeting addressed issues of attendance, pupils isolating and remote education.<sup>312</sup> DfE reported that high attendance rates had been achieved at the start of the academic year and maintained despite the growing prevalence of the virus but the need to maximise attendance of vulnerable children was acknowledged. DfE was concerned about the vulnerabilities facing children, both those who were known to children's services and those who were not yet known. There was evidence of an upwards trajectory in various indicators of risk such as the volume of helpline calls and police referrals. In response to concerns about the increased vulnerabilities facing children, DfE intended to maximise their attendance in education settings and continue to give priority to the attendance of vulnerable children; this included continuing to give schools flex to identify vulnerable children that were not yet known to children's services. Alongside this, DfE emphasised coordination across education and children's social care services to ensure that concerns were followed up. There was also cross-government work, as part of DfE's 'Vulnerable Children' delivery priority, on children's education, safety and wellbeing.<sup>313</sup>
- 6.50. Regarding transmission in schools, the emerging evidence was that children and young people played only a limited role in the transmission of COVID-19 and transmission in educational settings appeared very limited. DfE observed that these conclusions were consistent with the data emanating from testing and the monitoring of school attendance. The Prime Minister had been clear that restrictions on education should be a measure of last resort. Consistent with this, DfE had intervened in Merseyside to prevent schools in Liverpool from extending the length of half-term. Education considerations were being incorporated into the Cabinet Office negotiations with local areas entering tier 3.<sup>314</sup>

---

<sup>309</sup> JF/349 - INQ000546704: Slidepack: 'HEI Outbreak planning: Best practice and common pitfalls', 22.09.20

<sup>310</sup> JF/350 - INQ000546703 Letter to DsPH - 'protecting and improving the nation's health', 25.09.20

<sup>311</sup> JF/351 - INQ000090117: Actions and Decisions, COVID-O (Officials) 19.10.20

<sup>312</sup> JF/352 - INQ000090286: Agenda, COVID-O (Officials) 20.10.20

<sup>313</sup> JF/353 - INQ000090114: Paper - 'Schools Update for COVID-O' 26.10.20

<sup>314</sup> For example, JF/354 - INQ000546709: Email exchange No.10 and CTF re 'Liverpool-Schools', 14.10.20

- 6.51. Other outcomes from the meeting<sup>315</sup> included the measures being taken by DfE to support disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils who had been disproportionately affected by the closure of schools. Following the COVID-O (Officials) meeting, the CTF started discussions with DfE on developing the data on the attendance of vulnerable children in school, which was highlighted as a concern by DfE. The CTF remained engaged on this issue, drawing data from Local Authorities to track changes to vulnerable children's attendance in primary and secondary school.<sup>316</sup>
- 6.52. At COVID-O on 22 October 2020, ministers discussed the conditions on which students would be permitted to return home for Christmas. In a briefing prepared for CDL, it was noted that No.10 had expressed concerns about the robustness of DfE's plans, the need to work up a mass testing option and the understanding that Devolved Administrations' plans were not well advanced<sup>317</sup>. Further work was required - by DfE and the devolved administrations - before an approach could be agreed and it was expected that substantive decisions would take place the following week. Joint advice was prepared by the Cabinet Office and DfE considering the options for managing the end of term in HE settings, including consideration of the approach to key policies and mitigation strategies across the four nations. Some of the risks and challenges associated with allowing students to return home could be mitigated by the adoption of a mass testing approach. Pilot schemes were already operating in universities to test the contacts of positive cases and thereby to reduce time in self-isolation. However, it was recognised that the use of mass testing in the field had not yet been validated, that the adoption of a mass testing approach would require universities to be prioritised over other sectors and would present a considerable logistical challenge. Measures requiring students to reduce social contact or self-isolate would by contrast involve a lower dependency on testing.<sup>318</sup>
- 6.53. During the meeting, the Minister for Universities reported that mass testing offered the best solution for managing the safe return home of students - although there was a danger of over-promising on the delivery of mass testing in time for Christmas. It was therefore necessary for other mitigations to be in place. Work to validate mass testing in educational settings had begun that week, however, further time was needed to develop a dedicated testing approach for universities and to prepare plans to facilitate the safe return of students to university in January 2021.<sup>319</sup> In discussion, the devolved administrations were keen to

---

<sup>315</sup> JF/355 - INQ000090287: Actions and Decisions, COVID-O 20.10.2020. See also JF/356 - INQ000546832: CTF email re VCYP attendance data 12.11.20

<sup>316</sup> JF/357 - INQ000546820: Email chain - 'DfE/No.10/CTF meeting on attendance data on disadvantaged children', 20.10.2020, JF/358 - INQ000622815: Email chain - Concern regarding VCYP Attendance 16.11.2020

<sup>317</sup> JF/359 - INQ000090207: Chair's Brief, COVID-O 22.10.20

<sup>318</sup> JF/360 - INQ000090130: Paper - 'Higher Education: Approach to end of term' (CO/DfE) 22.10.20

<sup>319</sup> JF/361 - INQ000090174: Minutes, COVID-O 22.10.20

agree a consistent approach across the UK, with consideration given to regional differences in HE and the divergences in lockdown restrictions. At the conclusion of the meeting, NHS T&T, DHSC and DfE were commissioned to develop a proposal on mass testing that would enable the safe return home of students at the end of term.<sup>320</sup>

- 6.54. On 23 October 2020, a CDL-chaired COVID-O meeting reviewed the data on schools previously discussed at COVID-O (Officials) on 20 October. The Chair's brief outlined that No.10 remained interested in ways to reduce the number of children isolating (and therefore not attending school) unnecessarily. Remote education was an issue of serious concern to both the CTF and No.10. The concern related to the volume and quality of learning provided to pupils who were isolating. It was considered that more needed to be done to set minimum standards for remote learning and to enable intervention if these standards were not met.<sup>321</sup>
- 6.55. DfE reported that it was working with PHE to review the definition of a 'close contact' as it applied in primary schools. The purpose of the review was to assess the feasibility of requiring fewer pupils to self-isolate in the event of a confirmed case within their class or bubble. It was noted that a relaxation of the rules in primary schools would create an exception to the broader public health message and would, therefore, have to be grounded in evidence of low transmission in schools. The review was informed by international comparators. Other possible mitigations such as the wearing of face coverings in classrooms and reducing the size of class bubbles were ruled out by DfE on the grounds that they would be harmful to learning and impractical.<sup>322</sup>
- 6.56. On the topic of remote education, DfE reported that it had set clear expectations of schools, and that monitoring was in place to ensure accountability. In terms of enforcement, the Department noted that the temporary continuity direction (placing a duty on schools to provide remote education) had entered into force on 22 October 2020 and that it was empowered to take court action against schools which failed to engage with support and improve the quality of provision. Urgent work was being undertaken by DfE to develop a minimum acceptable standard addressing both quality and quantity of remote learning. In parallel, Ofsted was engaged in research to set an appropriate benchmark for its inspections.
- 6.57. In the meeting, the Education Secretary warned that the rise in the rate of infections was placing considerable pressure on schools as growing numbers of staff were required to self-isolate. He acknowledged that schools might struggle to remain open if the workforce absence rate continued to rise and requested that the government continue to prioritise

---

<sup>320</sup> JF/362 - INQ000090133: Actions and Decisions, COVID-O 22.10.20

<sup>321</sup> JF/363 - INQ000090290: Brief, COVID-O 23.10.20

<sup>322</sup> JF/328 - INQ000090128: Paper - 'Schools Update for COVID-O' 23.10.20

testing for staff working in education. It was also reported that DfE was in discussion with HMT concerning the financial pressures on schools needing to fund supply teachers to cover staff absences.<sup>323</sup>

- 6.58. In discussion, it was noted the decision to keep schools open was a core part of the government's strategy on COVID-19 and that it was supported by a growing scientific consensus that schools had a limited impact on the rates of transmission. On testing, it was observed that there had been a recent improvement in turnaround times and that improvements to the general testing programmes would support teachers to remain in schools. An increase in pupil attendance rates was also expected as new testing technology was being piloted on students. Improvements in the quality and quantity of remote education were needed as data showed that only 30% of secondary schools were providing more than four hours of remote learning per day and less than half of schools were providing daily feedback to pupils.
- 6.59. The CTF was commissioned to support DfE and Ofsted in devising suitable mechanisms to monitor the effectiveness of remote education and progress made by pupils in learning the curriculum when studying remotely. DfE was invited to work with the CTF in clarifying the minimum number of hours and the quality of remote education which schools would be expected to deliver.<sup>324</sup> Following discussions between CTF, DfE and No. 10, DfE published updated guidance on 15 December 2020 setting out the government's expectations on the amount and quality of remote education expected of schools. The revised guidance placed a new requirement on schools to publish details of their remote education offer on their website from January 2021.
- 6.60. COVID-O (Officials) met on 26 October 2020 to consider the government's effort to improve the health outcomes of disproportionately impacted groups, ahead of a COVID-O meeting on 29 October 2020. The Prime Minister had made clear that the package of measures put forward in late September was insufficient, and that a more ambitious package of measures was needed to avoid a replication of the disproportionate impacts in the second wave. Prior to the meeting, CDL had written to colleagues in Cabinet to reiterate the need for more ambitious and far-reaching proposals to be made.<sup>325</sup> The CTF and the cross-government SRO for Disproportionately Impacted Groups in MHCLG produced advice drawing together and summarising each departments' proposals. With regard to young people, DfE proposed to launch a communications programme targeted at HE students at greater risk of

---

<sup>323</sup> JF/364 - INQ000090158: Minute, COVID-O 23.10.20

<sup>324</sup> JF/365 - INQ000090288: Actions and Decisions, COVID-O 23.10.20

<sup>325</sup> JF/366 - INQ000468622: Letter - CDL letter to departments re responses on disproportionate impacts, October 2020

transmission or likely to be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. One of the additional measures proposed by the CTF was for DCMS to reach out to vulnerable young people via youth organisations to reduce the longer-term impact on this group.<sup>326</sup> In further advice produced by the Cabinet Office, it was acknowledged that school closures had had a disproportionate impact on ethnic minority groups exacerbating inequalities in education.<sup>327</sup> BEIS was asked to clarify proposals on childcare voucher schemes, in relation to self-isolation requirements.<sup>328</sup>

- 6.61. At COVID-O on 29 October 2020, ministers were invited to agree to the package of measures coordinated by the CTF and the SRO for Disproportionately Impacted Groups to mitigate the disparate health impact of COVID-19.<sup>329</sup> The need for focused communications efforts through the press and social media channels were discussed, to increase school attendance among ethnic minority children, and to persuade therapists and other staff who worked with children with disabilities to return to work.
- 6.62. It was recognised that staff from BAME backgrounds represented a substantial proportion of the workforce in educational and child social care settings and that it was important to ensure these staff received the testing and support they needed. The committee noted the need to focus on protecting support for families with new-born children due to the increase in harm and death among babies under one. DfE was continuing work with the Chief Nursing Officer to protect health visitors from being redeployed in the second wave.<sup>330</sup>
- 6.63. DHSC was tasked with exploring the need for NHS support for new parents to remain in place despite resourcing constraints during the second wave. Cabinet Office Communications were commissioned to work with MHCLG and other departments to improve alignment in communication and engagement efforts across government, and to engage with DCMS to consider which media outlets would reach furthest into groups that were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.
- 6.64. A further meeting of COVID-O was held on 30 October 2020 to discuss how the Government should respond to the ongoing rise in the prevalence of the virus. In a strategy paper presented by the CTF, it was noted that incidence rates were increasing throughout England and that on the existing trajectory bed capacity in the NHS would be exceeded on 4 December 2020. The CTF proposed implementing a national intervention for a period of four

<sup>326</sup> JF/367 - INQ000090136: Paper - Disproportionately Impacted Groups (SRO/CTF) 28.10.20

<sup>327</sup> JF/368 - INQ000090146: Data presentation - COVID-19: Disproportionately impacted groups (CO) 26.10.20

<sup>328</sup> JF/369 - INQ000090138: Actions, COVID-O (Officials) 26.10.20

<sup>329</sup> JF/370 - INQ000090144: Paper - Disproportionately Impacted Groups (SRO/CTF) 29.10.20; JF/371 - INQ000090146: Annex A - Data Slides 'Covid-19: Disproportionately Impacted Groups'; JF/372 - INQ000090145: Annex B - 'Disproportionately Impacted Groups: key insights and updates' 27.10.20

<sup>330</sup> JF/373 - INQ000090185: Minutes, COVID-O 29.10.20

weeks to bring R substantially below 1 and to curb the growth in hospitalisations and deaths. The proposed measures included the closure of non-essential retail, the reintroduction of 'stay at home' legislation and restrictions on hospitality, leisure and personal care. Schools and universities, however, were to remain open.<sup>331</sup> The Committee agreed that there was a need to introduce these measures to reduce transmission and protect the NHS.<sup>332</sup>

- 6.65. A Cabinet meeting on 31 October 2020 reviewed the package of measures which had been agreed by COVID-O the previous day. In discussion, it was noted that children would continue to benefit from education as schools were being kept open, recognising that schools, colleges and universities created opportunities for young people. It was observed that child abuse had been a hidden harm of the first national lockdown and that it was essential that services to support children remained available and that the government took active steps to tackle the crime this time around. The Health Secretary reiterated the government strategy to suppress the virus, and protect education, the economy and the NHS. Summing up, the Prime Minister stated that advances in testing technology would help to keep education going and that "children should stay in school for as long as possible".<sup>333</sup>
- 6.66. The Prime Minister announced the new national restrictions later that day, which were to come into effect from 5 November 2020. Keeping young people in education was highlighted as a national priority, so early years settings, schools, colleges and universities were to remain open. Universities and adult learning providers were encouraged to increase online provision. Parents could access registered childcare and other childcare activities where necessary to enable them to work, and to form a childcare bubble with another household for the purposes of informal childcare, where the child was 13 or under.<sup>334</sup> Otherwise, children's activities and sports were not permitted to go ahead.
- 6.67. Arrangements for HE students returning home for Christmas were discussed at a COVID-O (Officials) on 2 November 2020, ahead of a COVID-O meeting on 5 November 2020. DfE provided a paper which acknowledged that the new national lockdown in England required a reappraisal of the Government's plans to manage the return home of students at the end of term. The paper said that students had been requested to remain at university and that universities would remain open. The paper noted that guidance to universities had emphasised the importance of making in-person teaching available to all students<sup>335</sup> - this advice was based on three underlying public health principles: to avoid students returning home and thereby increasing transmission risk; to support the wellbeing and mental health of

<sup>331</sup> JF/374 - INQ000136687: Paper - 'Covid Strategy' (CTF) 30.10.20

<sup>332</sup> JF/375 - INQ000090156: Minutes, COVID-O 30.10.20

<sup>333</sup> JF/376 - INQ000089102: Minutes, Cabinet 31.10.20

<sup>334</sup> JF/377 - INQ000065414: Press Release - 'Prime Minister announces new national restrictions', 31.10.20

<sup>335</sup> JF/378 - INQ000546774: Press Release - 'Updated guidance for universities ahead of reopening', 10.09.20

students; and based on evidence that outbreaks of COVID-19 at universities was linked to social activities more so than the learning environment. The paper recommended that an exemption be made to any regulations which remained in force at the end of the initial period of lockdown to permit students to return home from 2 December 2020. Universities would be asked to end all in-person teaching during the first week of December. Moreover, it was proposed that mass testing be made widely available within universities and that it be focused on the areas of highest risk. It was recognised that DfE needed to collaborate with the DfT and universities to develop a transport plan which minimised the risk of transmission and overcrowding.<sup>336</sup> Ministers discussed the plan at COVID-O on 5 November where they agreed to recommend the proposals to the Prime Minister.<sup>337</sup> The CTF prepared a note for the Prime Minister<sup>338</sup> before working with PHE and the DCMO to prepare the guidance for HE providers ahead of publication.

- 6.68. On 4 November 2020, an Education Gold meeting considered scientific advice from SAGE on the lines of transmission, testing prioritisation for teachers (led by DHSC) and the need for ongoing communications which emphasised that schools were safe.<sup>339</sup> The meeting considered an education SitRep which covered school attendance in detail including the provision of remote education - as well as sector specific data on early years, vulnerable children, HE and further education.<sup>340</sup>
- 6.69. The data showed that more schools were open, compared to immediately before half term, whilst fewer had pupils isolating due to contact with a COVID-19 case. Attendance among vulnerable pupils on EHCP plans was 83%, and 82% for those with social workers. This was lower than for all pupils, but the gap was roughly in line with pre-COVID and these rates had increased. Children's social care referrals were 6% lower than the usual number at that time of year. The data indicated that schools with higher proportions of Free School Meals or BAME pupils had lower attendance on average, which was more pronounced within secondary schools.
- 6.70. Attention was being paid to schools delivering remote education and the quality of that provision. The volume of devices and routers delivered was being closely monitored – data from the SitRep showed that the total number of devices procured at this point was over 1,000,000 - which constituted every laptop and tablet within the price range available in the UK. Daily insights collected through DfE showed that 92% of schools had some form of

<sup>336</sup> JF/379 - INQ000546572: DfE Paper 'Government Approach to Managing the Return of Students at the End of Term December 2020' 02.11.20

<sup>337</sup> JF/380 - INQ000575682: Actions, COVID-O 05.11.20

<sup>338</sup> JF/381 - INQ000546713: PM Note - 'University Students Returning Home for Christmas', 08.11.20; JF/382 - INQ000546728 email chain 'DfE paper for Covid O - HE Return', 09.11.20

<sup>339</sup> JF/383 - INQ000546710: email 'Return to School Meeting – agenda', 03.11.20

<sup>340</sup> JF/384 - INQ000546551: Weekly DfE/Taskforce Meeting Situational Report, 04.11.20

remote learning in place, including 97% of secondary schools, 91% of primary schools and 95% of mixed phase settings. Driving up the quality of remote education and the work set had become urgent and a high priority; work by DfE was underway with Ofsted assurance visits and School to School Support for those schools struggling to deliver remote education. DfE was also drawing up further policy proposals linking minimum expectations for schools with a schools self-audit of remote teaching and Ofsted inspections.

6.71. On 5 November 2020, the second national lockdown came into force in England.

*The second national lockdown in England*

6.72. At COVID-O on 5 November 2020, ministers discussed travel corridors and the planned return home of students at Christmas.<sup>341</sup> DfE recommended that students be permitted to travel home at the end of the period of national restrictions without undertaking social distancing measures at home, on condition that they behave responsibly prior to their departure - guidance was to be issued setting out expectations and making them aware of the risks to themselves and their families.<sup>342</sup> Mass testing was intended to provide greater assurance that those who tested negative could travel home safely, however, further work was required from DfE and NHST&T to develop options for delivering mass testing to university students. In the absence of mass testing, it was recommended that the period of national lockdown should be considered sufficient to reduce the risk of transmission and to permit students to travel home. To manage pressure on public transport when students returned home, the paper proposed staggering the dates on which universities would be required to transition to online teaching. The Committee noted the benefits in aligning the announcements about the return of students across the four nations and the devolved administrations expressed their desire for continued coordination and close working on these plans.<sup>343</sup> COVID-O agreed to recommend implementation of DfE's proposals to the Prime Minister who received a briefing from CTF on 9 November<sup>344</sup> and the new guidance was announced on 11 November 2020.<sup>345</sup>

6.73. A 'Return to Schools Gold Meeting' was held on 11 November 2020, at which a SitRep by DfE was reviewed. The data showed that infection rates remained high for children and young people compared to other age groups. The number of pupils required to isolate had

---

<sup>341</sup> JF/385 - INQ000054088: Agenda, COVID-O 05.11.20

<sup>342</sup> JF/386 - INQ000507817: DfE Paper 'Government Approach to Managing the Return of Students at the End of Term December 2020' (this is an updated guidance)

<sup>343</sup> JF/387 - INQ000091136: Minute, COVID-O 05.11.20

<sup>344</sup> JF/388 - INQ000575683: Actions and Decisions, COVID-O 05.11.20; JF/381 - INQ000546713: PM Note 'University Students Returning Home for Christmas' 08.11.20; JF/382 - INQ000546728: Email readout of CTF briefing with PM on 09.11.20

<sup>345</sup> JF/389 - INQ000075697: Press release 'Christmas guidance set out for university students', 11.11.20; JF/390 - INQ000075698: Education Hub Questions and answers on Christmas Guidance for university students, 12.11.20

risen rapidly.<sup>346</sup> In response, the CTF took actions to convene weekly meetings on transmission in schools to assess the data; to review, with DfE, the wider set of metrics to be used to inform communications over the coming period; and to ensure that DfE were included in discussions about mass testing and vaccines prioritisation.<sup>347</sup> No.10 agreed to provide DfE with further feedback on the communications plan for the SAGE Children's Task and Finish Working Group paper, published on 13 November 2020 titled 'Update on children, schools and transmission'.<sup>348</sup>

6.74. A COVID-O (Officials) meeting on 16 November 2020 discussed managing the return of students to university in January 2021, ahead of a COVID-O meeting on 18 November 2020. DfE acknowledged that any significant extension of online learning would adversely affect planned assessments and courses with practical elements. It was noted that there were challenges in ensuring access to and engagement with long-term online learning which were likely to have the greatest adverse impact upon the most disadvantaged. There was consideration of advice from SAGE about the negative effects which missing or reduced access to education had upon the physical and mental health of students. The analysis also recognised that any long-term restrictions on students' ability to live and study at university would create significant financial pressures on the sector. In light of these factors and the steps which universities had taken to create COVID-Secure teaching environments, DfE recommended that consideration be given to exploring the option of a staggered return to university over a period of 2 weeks (or more) supported by mass testing to enable an orderly return to HE in January 2021. Further analysis was required to assess the impact that these measures would have on reducing the risk of transmission and that other options could be considered including a delayed or partial return of students to university. On the balance of evidence, mandating that all HE be provided online was ruled out<sup>349</sup> as was the option of a full return in January 2021 supported by enhanced testing capacity.<sup>350</sup>

6.75. A preliminary discussion of these options took place at COVID-O on 18 November 2020. In revised and updated DfE advice, it was acknowledged that phasing the return of students in January 2021 was unlikely to be sufficient to reduce the transmission of the virus. Feedback obtained from DCMO, PHE and the SAGE Secretariat had indicated that the benefits of a phased return to HE would mostly be lost if students were permitted to travel without first testing and (if infectious) isolating before leaving home to return to university.<sup>351</sup> Concerned

<sup>346</sup> JF/391 - INQ000546711: DfE/Taskforce SitRep, 11.11.20

<sup>347</sup> JF/392 - INQ000546707: Email - Readout/ Actions, Return to Schools Gold 11.10.20

<sup>348</sup> JF/393 - INQ000546796: Paper - Update on children, schools and transmission (CTFG) 04.11.20

<sup>349</sup> JF/394 - INQ000090912: Paper - 'Government Approach to Managing the Return of Students in January 2021' 16.11.20 (this is updated guidance)

<sup>350</sup> JF/395 - INQ000091195: Actions and Decisions, COVID-O (Officials) 16.11.20

<sup>351</sup> JF/396 - INQ000090925: Paper - 'Government Approach to Managing the Return of HE Students in January 2020 (sic)' 16.11.20

that the risk of students spreading the virus would be amplified if they could not access testing before they travelled, CDL asked DfE and NHST&T to urgently to revise their plans to reflect the proposal that students be tested both before they return to university in January 2021 and upon their arrival. It was agreed that the risks associated with the return of university students for the Spring term could also be mitigated by staggering start dates and prioritising students with practical courses requiring face to face teaching.<sup>352</sup>

- 6.76. COVID-O on 21 November 2020 considered proposals for community testing and the Government's COVID-19 Winter Plan.<sup>353</sup> In advice from the CTF, it was recommended that the Government implement a community testing programme as part of its strategy to manage the risk of transmission when lockdown restrictions were lifted in early December 2020. It was envisaged that this programme would complement the targeted testing of high risk groups and that exceptions would be made for those who were unable to participate in the programme, such as pupils residing in special needs schools.<sup>354</sup>
- 6.77. There were recommendations from the CTF on further restrictions to be applied across the three local tiers at the end of lockdown. It was proposed that children's groups and youth activities remain exempt from rules restricting social contact and that eligibility for support bubbles be extended to all parents of children aged under 1 as well as parents of children aged under 5 who had a disability requiring continuous care. The paper also contained proposals for permitting mixing of households over Christmas and suggested that an exemption be applied to existing support bubbles and to children aged under 18 whose parents had separated.<sup>355</sup> It was recognised that clear guidance would be needed to define the scope of bubbles and households for these measures.<sup>356</sup>
- 6.78. COVID-O (Officials) met on 23 November 2020<sup>357</sup>, ahead of the COVID-O meeting the following day, to discuss proposals for a new contingency plan for education and childcare as well as plans for the return of students to HE in January 2021. During the period of national restrictions, DfE had undertaken a review of the existing contingency framework for education and childcare which had been introduced in August 2020. DfE recommended replacing the three tiers of restrictions in education with a single contingency plan. The new plan would reflect the principle that all children and young people should remain in full-time education wherever possible. If restrictions on education were required to contain the virus, they would be based on public health and scientific advice and would be implemented in the

---

<sup>352</sup> JF/397 - INQ000226649: COVID-O weekly update to PM 20.11.20

<sup>353</sup> JF/398 - INQ000137262: HMG Covid-19 Winter Plan - published 23.11.20

<sup>354</sup> JF/399 - INQ000136695: Paper - 'Winter Plan: Community Testing' (CTF) 21.11.20

<sup>355</sup> JF/400 - INQ000090940: Paper - 'Winter Plan' (CTF) 21.11.20

<sup>356</sup> JF/401 - INQ000090954: Minute, COVID-O 21.11.20

<sup>357</sup> JF/402 - INQ000546563: Actions, COVID-O (Officials) 23.11.20

fewest number of settings and for the shortest period necessary. DfE would continue to give priority to ensuring the full-time attendance of primary school children, vulnerable children, children of critical workers and young people embarking on public exams. Where necessary, restrictions would be placed on the attendance of pupils in secondary schools and FE who did not qualify for prioritisation. In extreme circumstances, only vulnerable children and the children of critical workers would be allowed to attend early years and primary education. Local and regional decision-makers would not be permitted unilaterally to impose restrictions on education. Decisions about the implementation of restrictions would be based on a recommendation from DfE and made by collective ministerial agreement in COVID-O.<sup>358</sup>

- 6.79. Taking into account direction from ministers at COVID-O on 18 November, DfE set out proposals to mitigate the risks associated with students returning to HE in January 2021. This included implementing testing arrangements for all students on their arrival at university and during term time. It ruled out, however, the option of testing students before they travelled on the basis of advice from PHE, the DCMO, DHSC and NHST&T. DfE recommended a staggered return to HE in January 2021 which would prioritise students on practical courses requiring face to face teaching as well as those who were vulnerable or disadvantaged. Under this proposal, 40% of students would return by the start of term, 30% would return one week later and the remaining 30% would return two weeks after the planned start of term. The option of delaying the start of the Spring term was discussed but not recommended by DfE.<sup>359</sup>
- 6.80. COVID-O, chaired by CDL, met on 24 November 2020 to discuss the contingency plans for schools and early years and the return to HE in January 2021. Following representations from HMT, DfE submitted a revised proposal which presented an alternative option to the staggered return. Under these alternative plans, priority would still be given to the return of students on practical or clinical courses, with the return of other students delayed until after a review of the impact of social contact over the Christmas. It was envisaged that a staggered return of these remaining students would then take place over two weeks commencing on 25 January 2021. DfE identified several challenges in seeking to implement this alternative option known as “priority return plus review”. These included the risk of negatively affecting students’ wellbeing and their ability to complete their courses resulting in financial consequences, which were likely to have the greatest impact on disadvantaged students.<sup>360</sup>

---

<sup>358</sup> JF/403 - INQ000090948: Paper - ‘Contingency Framework for Education and Childcare - Replacement for Education and Childcare Tiers (SSE) 23.11.20

<sup>359</sup> JF/404 - INQ000090947: Paper - ‘HE January Return: Approach to Mass Testing (SSE/SSHSC)’ 20.11.20

<sup>360</sup> JF/405 - INQ000090952: Paper - ‘HE January Return: Approach to Mass Testing (SSE/SSHSC)’ 24.11.20 (date from file name)

- 6.81. At the meeting, the Education Secretary acknowledged that the co-existence of school tiers and the LCAL system determined by Government and local authorities for individual areas had caused confusion, as changes in LCALs had not been accompanied by changes in school tiers. The proposal was intended to simplify the approach to education by introducing a single contingency framework. Responsibility for determining whether to implement restrictions on education would rest with national government and decision-making would progress through the structure of the JBC's bronze, silver and gold meetings, and ultimately COVID-O. It reiterated that the Government's clear national policy was now to keep schools open and put education as a priority at the heart of its strategy, but that it remained important to have a contingency framework in place in the event public health advice supported imposing restrictions. The government's understanding of transmission in children was evolving and consequently it was important to keep the evidence under review.<sup>361</sup> Having received endorsement for the proposals, DfE announced the revised contingency framework for education on 27 November 2020.<sup>362</sup>
- 6.82. The Education Secretary then outlined the options for managing the return of students to HE, noting that DfE remained in favour of a staggered return from early January. However, it had proposed a 'priority return plus review' in response to concerns raised by HMT. If this alternative option were to be implemented, DfE would require a commitment from HMT to cover the cost of refunding students' accommodation expenses and tuition fees. It was, therefore, proposed that the return of all students should be postponed by a further two weeks, delaying the return of priority students until 18 January 2021 with the remainder receiving tuition in person from early February. In his summing up, CDL acknowledged that HMT was understandably cautious about the return to university and that it wished to know more about the impact of mixing over Christmas before sanctioning the mass migration of students. DfE, however, remained in favour of their original proposal for a staggered return. The option of a 'priority return plus review' offered a middle ground between the two department's differing views and was, therefore, to be preferred. Moreover, it enabled a further judgment to be made in the week of 18 January 2021 based on new data about the impact of mixing over Christmas. DfE was commissioned to work with HMT to agree a package of financial support for affected students and with NHST&T to ensure the delivery of mass testing to support the return of students in Spring.<sup>363</sup>
- 6.83. Christmas planning was discussed at a COBR meeting on 24 November 2020 where it was proposed that a Christmas bubble be limited to a maximum of three households and that

---

<sup>361</sup> JF/406 - INQ000091004: Minute, COVID-O 24.11.20

<sup>362</sup> JF/283 - INQ000546791: Guidance - 'Contingency framework: education and childcare settings' (Archived 30.11.20)

<sup>363</sup> JF/282 - INQ000091217: Decisions and Actions, COVID-O 24.11.20

each nation have the flexibility to define a household in a manner which was consistent with their respective approaches to support mechanisms.<sup>364</sup> It was agreed that the measures permitting increased social contact over Christmas should be implemented consistently with existing rules and definitions in each of the four administrations.<sup>365</sup>

- 6.84. On 25 November 2020, Education Gold met to review the latest data from DfE's SitRep.<sup>366</sup> Infection rates remained high for children and young people compared to other age groups and further investigation of transmission would be taking place. School attendance had declined as the impact of the rise in the virus hit. In response, actions were proposed which required cross-government coordination, such as schools mass testing pilots and the mobilisation of public sector efforts to improve the attendance of vulnerable children, including securing additional resources for school attendance officers. Following the meeting, No.10 and the CTF were asked to attend a meeting, convened by DfE, to discuss the latest updates on No Formal Designation (NFD) Ofsted inspections<sup>367</sup>.
- 6.85. Planning for Christmas and the return to school after the break was considered at the Education Gold on 2 December 2020 which looked at operational challenges and mass testing. A rise in COVID-19 cases led to more pupils isolating (particularly in secondary school-age children) especially in the hardest hit pandemic areas - although the data suggested that this could be stabilising.<sup>368</sup> The SitRep noted a particular challenge for attendance in schools with worse Ofsted grades, and stated that although, nationally, the attendance gap for vulnerable children was similar to the pre-pandemic levels, there were locations where there was cause for particular concern. To boost the attendance of vulnerable children, it was also proposed that additional resources be provided for school attendance officers to re-engage with the vulnerable, anxious and hard-to-reach pupils. It was noted that Ofsted would focus on the weakest schools as it resumed inspections.
- 6.86. Looking ahead, options were proposed to manage the impact if schools sought to close early and move to online education, or if parents withdrew children in anticipation of Christmas. DfE, DHSC, NHST&T and Cabinet Office were commissioned to progress mass testing as a priority.
- 6.87. Improvements to the provision of remote education could be seen from the data presented in the 2 December 2020 SitRep; with 99% of schools providing remote education with an

---

<sup>364</sup> JF/407 - INQ000083819: Paper - 'Social Contact During the Festive Period' 24.11.20

<sup>365</sup> JF/408 - INQ000083850: Minute, COBR 24.11.20

<sup>366</sup> JF/409 - INQ000546712: Weekly DfE/Taskforce Meeting Situational Report, 25.11.20

<sup>367</sup> JF/410 - INQ000546705: Email re Education Gold actions 25.11.2020; JF/411 - INQ000546794: Guidance - 'Interim phase: maintained schools and academies. An operational note for Her Majesty's Inspectors carrying out interim visits to state funded schools from 28 September 2020' on NFD inspections) Updated 02.12.20

<sup>368</sup> JF/412 - INQ000546706: Weekly DfE/Taskforce Meeting Situational Report, 02.12.20

increase in both the quantity and quality indicators over time. That same week, minimum standards were due to be published to provide a clear target for those schools not meeting the expected levels for number of hours set and regularity of feedback. A new version of the Remote Education Service on gov.uk was also launched, which was intended to be a 'one stop shop' for schools with improved usability.

## **7. EMERGENCE OF THE ALPHA VARIANT AND THE DECISION TO INTRODUCE FURTHER SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RESTRICTIONS - DECEMBER TO JANUARY 2021**

### **Summary**

- 7.1. Following the end of the second national lockdown on 2 December 2020, England moved to a tiered system of restrictions - in line with the strategic approach set out in the Winter Plan, and as confirmed on 26 November 2020. However, cases continued to rise in Kent and the South East, caused by the rapid spread of the new Alpha variant, discovered in early December 2020. As cases rose, the CTF, in conjunction with No.10, conducted policy work on the potential to further strengthen tiered restrictions. On 19 December 2020, COVID-O decided that the most affected areas would enter a new Tier 4, which would be broadly equivalent to a lockdown. In the context of emerging data about the nature and impact of the new variant, the Cabinet Office continued to closely monitor the prevalence of the virus among children and young people.
- 7.2. The Cabinet Office continued to convene regular committees throughout December, in order to understand and test the viability of policy options that would enable schools to remain open without attendance restrictions before the Christmas holidays and to return in January 2021. These options focused on the mass testing of children and young people and the staggering of the return to school of various cohorts.
- 7.3. In late December 2020, in light of mounting concerns regarding the data on the rapidly spreading Alpha variant, the CTF offered various policy options to the Prime Minister. A number of Ministerial meetings were held between 27 December 2020 and 4 January 2021 to discuss the most effective approach to the situation.
- 7.4. The Prime Minister announced a delay in the return of secondary schools and universities on 30 December 2020. Following further concerns about rising cases, particularly among 10-19 year-olds and transmission to the vulnerable and elderly, meetings of COVID-O and Cabinet were convened in the first week of January 2021 to discuss further restrictions. This ultimately led to restrictions to educational attendance across all age groups, with the exception of vulnerable children and the children of key workers, as part of the third national lockdown announced on 4 January 2021.

### **Exam Planning for 2021**

- 7.5. On 1 December 2020, EDS updated the Prime Minister on the next steps for exams in 2021.<sup>369</sup> The note outlined the approach which the Prime Minister had earlier agreed the

---

<sup>369</sup> JF/413 - INQ000546729: Note for Prime Minister - Announcement on exams 2021 01.12.20

Education Secretary could announce later that week. It also acknowledged the Prime Minister's earlier concern about the need to explain to the public and education sector why holding exams with adaptations and generous grading was a fairer and better approach than teacher-assessed results, and his desire for assurance that DfE was taking all necessary steps to raise school attendance and deliver effective provisions where pupils could not attend. The note outlined the steps being taken by DfE, with support from the No.10 Policy Unit, No.10 Comms team and the CTF, to address these concerns, including by providing weekly updates to the Prime Minister on progress, exploring the options for an expert group to look at tackling differential learning (i.e. the risk that individual pupils, schools or areas may have been more affected overall by COVID disruption) and scoping for a Plan B in the event that nationwide exams could not go ahead. The package of measures, as agreed, was announced by the Education Secretary on 3 December 2020.<sup>370</sup>

*The lead up to Christmas 2020 - attendance and testing in schools*

- 7.6. On 4 December 2020, the CTF provided advice to the Prime Minister regarding school attendance, testing and Christmas.<sup>371</sup> Attendance had remained lower since half term, though with some recent improvement and the Education Secretary had written to the Prime Minister with plans to improve attendance and roll out testing in schools. The Education Secretary did not want to use the strongest lever (emergency Ofsted inspections before Christmas), but proposed a focus on attendance in the following term's Ofsted monitoring visits. Responding to the CTF's advice on the Prime Minister's behalf, No.10 noted that the Prime Minister was content to bring forward the start of Christmas holidays to 17 December 2020 by closing schools if necessary, but he wanted a clear timetable for the full roll out of testing in schools and was keen to ensure schools were not encouraged to send children home but should instead be working to solve attendance issues, rather than deferring to local government enforcement action.<sup>372</sup>
- 7.7. COVID-O on 8 December 2020 focused on the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on disabled people.<sup>373</sup> The SRO for Disproportionately Impacted Groups presented a paper prepared by the CTF<sup>374</sup> including the key insight that disabled children and their families had reduced access to services and support. The paper proposed promoting the new exemptions in isolation rules which assisted families of disabled children (which included relaxations for children under 5 and carers of people with disabilities, and which were permitted the 5

---

<sup>370</sup> JF/414 - INQ000507113: DfE Statement - Extra Measures to Support Students Ahead of Next Summers Exams 03.12.20

<sup>371</sup> JF/415 - INQ000546731: Note to the Prime Minister - School Attendance Testing and Christmas 04.12.20

<sup>372</sup> JF/416 - INQ000546730: Email - School attendance Testing and Christmas 07.12.20

<sup>373</sup> JF/417 - INQ000091044: Minutes, Covid-O 08.12.20

<sup>374</sup> JF/418 - INQ000325294: Paper - Disproportionately Impacted Groups Disability (C-19 Taskforce) 08.12.20

November lockdown rules), as well as a £1.03 billion package from DfE to improve educational provision in both mainstream and special schools, and the enhancement of specialist training, digital education and access to educational psychologists. To alleviate COVID-19 related pressures, £5 million was to be made available to low-income families supporting disabled children through the Family Fund. COVID-O supported the recommended measures and CDL commissioned Cabinet Office and DCMS to work on digital packages, including funding with HMT.<sup>375</sup> The measures were to be announced as part of the Spending Review.

- 7.8. On 9 December 2020, the Health Secretary confirmed to the Prime Minister that DHSC were working with DfE on agreeing a roll-out for testing in schools.<sup>376</sup> Departments were made aware of evolving policy through the Students and Young People X-Whitehall Working Group which included representatives from DfE, DHSC, PHE, Home Office, DfT, DfT, MHCLG and HSE. While it ordinarily focussed on testing young people in FE and HE educational settings, the working group was made aware of the plan to deliver mass testing in schools at their regular meeting on 9 December 2020.<sup>377</sup>
- 7.9. At COVID-O on 10 December 2020, the Education Secretary presented a paper<sup>378</sup> on the prioritisation and roll-out of rapid testing in educational settings. It proposed using testing to identify asymptomatic cases from January 2021, in order to keep schools open and absences low. The huge importance of keeping schools open was noted, as well as the role that testing could have in achieving public health, education and economic benefits. COVID-O sought confirmation as to the practicality and deliverability of testing in schools, colleges and universities, and the impact these measures would have on other testing initiatives, which were a matter for the Testing Prioritisation Board. In summing up, CDL stated that the Committee agreed to DfE's recommended base proposal, but that this was subject to NHST&T confirming deliverability. COVID-O appreciated the need to communicate any decisions as to testing urgently, so that educational settings had an opportunity to prepare. Consequently, the ambition was for DfE to announce the plans no later than 14 December 2020. The CTF updated the Prime Minister on the outcome of this meeting, noting that while the sector appeared enthusiastic, the implementation challenge could not be underestimated.<sup>379</sup>

---

<sup>375</sup> JF/419 - INQ000091234: Actions, Covid-O 08.12.20

<sup>376</sup> JF/420 - INQ000622809: Email: Testing in schools 09.12.2020

<sup>377</sup> JF/421 - INQ000622810: Email to S&YP working group 09.12.20

<sup>378</sup> JF/422 - INQ000075484: Paper - Asymptomatic Testing in Schools, Colleges and Universities From January 2021

<sup>379</sup> JF/423 - INQ000546566: Advice to PM

- 7.10. Also on 10 December 2020, the Welsh Government announced that secondary schools would move to remote learning for the final week of term. The First Minister said that the decision followed expert advice from Wales's CMO showing that the public health situation in Wales was deteriorating.
- 7.11. On 11 December 2020, the link between high COVID-19 prevalence, particularly in secondary school age children, and non-attendance was acknowledged in an Education Gold meeting.<sup>380</sup> Teacher absence was also closely tied to the prevalence of the virus. ONS data showed increased rates of infection in school age children and their parents particularly in London and the East of England.<sup>381</sup> The CTF provided an update note to the Prime Minister later that day on the plan to deploy surge testing for secondary school pupils and families across seven boroughs of London in response to high COVID-19 infections.<sup>382</sup> On the same day, NHST&T, DHSC, GoScience, NHS England, DfE were provided with a readout of the Prime Minister's testing meeting which had considered the rollout of testing in schools.
- 7.12. Testing in educational settings was highlighted as a key area of focus for COVID-O in CDL's weekly update note to the Prime Minister on 11 December 2020 which stated that COVID-O had agreed plans to roll out serial testing in schools and FE settings subject to NHST&T deliverability and that mobile testing units were to be sent to select schools in North East London and Essex.<sup>383</sup> Capacity for this testing was confirmed by NHST&T on 11 December 2020.<sup>384</sup>

*The identification of the Alpha variant through to Christmas 2020*

- 7.13. On 11 December 2020, the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG), which is an expert advisory committee of the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), discussed a new variant of COVID-19 which had been identified in the South East of England. The CTF provided a paper for COVID-O, chaired by the Prime Minister on Monday 14 December 2020, which took the decision to move London and other parts of the South East to tier 3. While this was approved (and announced on the same day),<sup>385</sup> the meeting also noted that local leaders had sought the closure of schools in particularly affected regions, but this was not supported by DfE as: (i) some schools were engaged in testing children in the area; (ii) the complexity of implementing school closures; and (iii) the fact that schools only had four days before Christmas holiday closures in any event. While

<sup>380</sup> JF/424 - INQ000546719: Gold agenda; JF/425 - INQ000546614: Paper 10.12.20

<sup>381</sup> JF/426 - INQ000091050: Paper - Special GOLD South East London 13.12.20

<sup>382</sup> JF/427 - INQ000546732: Paper - Testing London and Incentives Update 11.12.20

<sup>383</sup> JF/428 - INQ000226652: CDL Weekly Covid Operations Update 11.12.20

<sup>384</sup> JF/429 - INQ000546575: Email Chain Between Officials from CO, NHST&T and Education 11.12.20

<sup>385</sup> N.B The tier changes came into force on 16 December 2020 - see paragraph 7.15

some London boroughs proposed to close schools early, such as Greenwich, DfE was working hard to ensure they stayed open.<sup>386</sup> In its meeting of 14 December 2020, COVID-O was reminded that officials were considering the options for January 2021, including staggering the return in order to roll out mass testing to students. The Prime Minister voiced his support for schools staying open. It was agreed that work should begin on options for delaying the return to school following Christmas, to enable the mass testing of students. DfE and NHST&T were commissioned to work urgently on a plan for testing in schools at the start of the January term.<sup>387</sup>

7.14. The following day, on 15 December 2020, Cabinet was updated on school attendance and efforts to keep schools open until Christmas.<sup>388</sup> The Quad meeting on the same day discussed the issues in detail. A CTF paper on options suggested that testing was considered to have the greatest impact if combined with a partial delay to the return of schools, allowing children to be tested before they return.<sup>389</sup> The Prime Minister indicated that the government should look to delay the start of term to 11 January 2021 to facilitate use of testing facilities at school and provide a buffer from the effects of easing restrictions over Christmas.<sup>390</sup> To deliver testing in schools, HMT agreed to DfE's request to fund the additional workforce in schools and FE, depending on certain conditions being met.<sup>391</sup>

7.15. Consistent with this steer, an action from the COVID-O (Officials) meeting on 15 December<sup>392</sup> was for DfE to develop options on a full return or a staggered return from 11 January 2021 for COVID-O. This was to include options for vulnerable children and children of critical workers, and a proposal to mitigate the impact on exam-year students. At the meeting, DfE, CTF, DHSC, No.10 Communications and PHE were asked to develop a communications plan to support the delayed return, and to discuss with CMO and CSA how to support the announcement. Supporting work was commissioned from DHSC, NHST&T, and the CTF.<sup>393</sup> On deliverability, NHST&T were asked to work with DfE, HMT, DfT and MoD to develop a workforce plan, exploring delivery options and testing routes. This included investigating what support could be provided by the military through the use of Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (a 'MACA' request) which can be used when the military is required to provide assistance during a crisis.

---

<sup>386</sup> JF/430 - INQ000091065: Minutes, Covid-O 14.12.20

<sup>387</sup> JF/431 - INQ000091257: Action, Covid-O 14.12.20

<sup>388</sup> JF/432 - INQ000089014: Minutes, Covid-O 14.12.20

<sup>389</sup> JF/433 - INQ000507799: Paper - Options for Broader Response (Cabinet Office) 15.12.20

<sup>390</sup> JF/434 - INQ000249585: Readout 14.12.20

<sup>391</sup> JF/435 - INQ000622808: Email DfE, HMT and No.10 on Schools Covid workforce fund 15.12.20

<sup>392</sup> JF/436 - INQ000091062: Paper - Approach to Managing the Return of School and Colleges at the Start of January 2021 15.12.20; JF/437 - INQ000091142: Actions, Covid-O 15.12.20

<sup>393</sup> JF/436 - INQ000091062: Paper - Approach to Managing the Return of School and Colleges at the Start of January 2021 15.12.20; JF/437 - INQ000091142: Actions, Covid-O 15.12.20

- 7.16. The following day, on 16 December 2020, COVID-O discussed staggering the return to school, supported by testing. The Education Secretary proposed that mass testing be administered through lateral flow tests, with some secondary school pupils starting 4 January 2021, with a second cycle of testing starting 11 January 2021.<sup>394</sup> He raised frank concerns about delivery, it being apparent the workforce to administer tests would fall short of the required numbers. Departments were asked to collaborate to find solutions, as DfE was keen to avoid keeping pupils out of school. COVID-O agreed to the proposal on the delayed and staggered return of pupils to secondary schools and colleges - that being schools and colleges were to provide remote education to most pupils from 4 January 2021, only opening for face-to-face education for vulnerable children, children of critical workers, and those in exam years. The remaining pupils were to return in the week commencing Monday 11 January 2021, with a test on their return.
- 7.17. A further COVID-O later the same day, 16 December 2020, reviewed tiers in England. Data to support decisions on local tiering drew out information about the high infection rate of children and young people in some areas, with transmission rates presented broken down into age ranges of 0-15 years and 16-29 years.<sup>395</sup> In discussion it was noted that SAGE had estimated that the majority of transmissions were occurring in hospitals, care homes and schools. Although the Christmas holiday would have the effect that schools were closed, CSA's opinion was that this itself would not reduce R significantly.<sup>396</sup> The meeting also received information on the particular impact of tiering on young people and ethnic minorities, due to these groups being disproportionately employed in the accommodation and food sectors.<sup>397</sup> Although the Government had put in place financial support for these industries, youth unemployment had experienced the highest increase since March 2020.
- 7.18. As agreed at COVID-O, on 17 December 2020 the Education Secretary announced<sup>398</sup> the staggered roll out of testing of staff and students in secondary schools and colleges in England from 4 January 2021. Students in exam year groups, vulnerable children and children of critical workers were to attend school or college in person from the start of term, as well as students in primary, special and alternative provision schools and colleges. Vocational exams scheduled for the week of 4 January 2021 were to go ahead as planned. Secondary schools and colleges would operate a staggered return, with some receiving remote learning until 11 January 2021, when they would restart face-to-face education. CDL

---

<sup>394</sup> JF/438 - INQ000091143: Minute Covid-O 16.12.20

<sup>395</sup> JF/439 - INQ000059305: Local Action GOLD (London & South) 14.12.20; JF/440 - INQ000234233: Local Action GOLD (Midlands & North) 14.12.20

<sup>396</sup> JF/441 - INQ000091076: Minutes, Covid-O 16.12.20

<sup>397</sup> JF/442 - INQ000091069: Paper - 16 December Tiers Review Point 16.12.20

<sup>398</sup> JF/443 - INQ000075710: DfE Statement - Staggered Roll Out of Coronavirus Testing for Secondary Schools and Colleges 17.12.20

updated the Prime Minister on this announcement, and recorded the need for further work on a deliverable testing and workforce plan.<sup>399</sup>

- 7.19. DfE led the development of the workforce plan through December 2020, with the Cabinet Office including No.10 supporting discussions with NHST&T, HMT and MoD.<sup>400</sup> As discussed in the COVID-O meeting on 16 October 2020, there were already significant pressures on military resources due to their deployment on testing in tier 3 areas, therefore relying on the military to coordinate and administer testing in schools was not the preferred delivery route. A SitRep produced by DfE on 23 December 2020 set out progress against the plan, including the funding agreements and delivery risks. It shows that the remaining delivery obstacles and potential solutions were being worked through, significant funding had been secured via NHST&T and delivery of the plan was not contingent on military support.<sup>401</sup> The Defence Secretary did, however, agree to the MACA request on 28 December 2020, which provided military support to schools to plan and carry-out (but not administer) testing, along with targeted deployment of military personnel to schools that were struggling to deploy testing.<sup>402</sup>
- 7.20. NERVTAG met on Friday 18 December 2020. The science and projects team in the Taskforce, established in the summer, had forged strong links with the SAGE and subgroup secretariats and attended the vast majority of meetings as an observer to ensure open channels of communication and rapid flows of information. NERVTAG had moderate confidence that the new variant demonstrated a substantial increase in transmissibility compared to other variants. The Prime Minister was updated at a Dashboard meeting on that same day.<sup>403</sup> He agreed to meet with COVID-O later that evening to discuss the latest evidence and the options which the CTF was developing. The immediate concern was the measures to put in place over Christmas, such as cancelling Christmas bubbles. The impact of schools being closed for the holidays was suggested as having potential for reducing transmission, although the point was made that families meeting up over Christmas could counteract that effect. The specific interests of children and young people featured in the considerations, with information presented in a paper about the disproportionate economic effects of restrictions on young people.<sup>404</sup>
- 7.21. COVID-O agreed to reconvene the next morning,<sup>405</sup> Saturday 19 December 2020, taking a paper prepared by the CTF with recommended options for response. The Committee

<sup>399</sup> JF/444 - INQ000226653 CDL Note - Weekly Covid Operations Update 18.12.20

<sup>400</sup> JF/445 - INQ000622777: Email chain - DfE and No.10 on deliverability and announcements 18.12.20

<sup>401</sup> JF/446 - INQ000622807: DfE Mass Testing SitRep 23.12.20

<sup>402</sup> JF/447 - INQ000622806: No10 note - testing delivery and Jan restart 28.12.20

<sup>403</sup> JF/448 - INQ000217008: COVID-19 Briefing Dashboard 18.12.20; JF/449 - INQ000091275: COVID-19 Briefing Dashboard 18.12.20; JF/450 - INQ000146623: Readout 18.12.20; JF/451 - INQ000234245: Paper - Update on New Viral Variant VUI 202012/01 18.12.20

<sup>404</sup> JF/452 - INQ000091082: Paper - Response to the New Covid Variant 18.12.20

<sup>405</sup> JF/453 - INQ000091087: Minutes, Covid-O 18.12.20

decided that London and much of the South East would enter a new Tier 4, which would be broadly equivalent to a lockdown, and that plans for Christmas bubbles would be scaled back<sup>406</sup>. This was announced later that day. The paper also suggested that the Committee revisit the question of the return of universities, FE colleges and secondary schools, in the event that tighter restrictions were required in January 2021.<sup>407</sup>

7.22. The CTF continued to monitor the data very closely and began to prepare for the period following Christmas, working closely with No.10 and other departments. On 22 December 2020, for instance, a COVID-O (Officials) meeting focussed on education. A draft paper from DfE was considered, which noted preliminary evidence of increased transmissibility of the variant in children and young people.<sup>408</sup> DfE recommended maintaining the plan that had been announced on 17 December 2020 (above) until after Christmas to ensure that any decision was fully informed by as much evidence as possible. The paper then proposed a series of options contingent on what scientific evidence showed, such as prioritising testing over remote education, or extending the staggered return of secondary schools and colleges to 18 January 2021 supplemented by remote education. The actions of the meeting recorded that SAGE should assist in decision-making, by providing further scientific evidence as it developed and modelling of schools staying open and closed.<sup>409</sup> DfE took actions to develop the policy options, their implications and their impacts. No.10 was to set up a small group ministerial meeting to consider the options.

7.23. On 23 December 2020, the Government announced that more of East and South East England would go into Tier 4 from Boxing Day (alongside other areas, such as in the South West, moving up from Tier 1 to 2 or Tier 2 to 3).

*The run-up to the 30 December announcement on schools and universities*

7.24. On 28 December 2020, the Prime Minister met with the Education Secretary, the Health Secretary, the Defence Secretary (in attendance given the role of military support for testing infrastructure) and CDL with the objective of deciding how school, college and university return should be handled in the context of the new COVID-19 variant and to review the latest epidemiological picture. CTF officials were also in attendance. DfE provided slides<sup>410</sup> to support the meeting, which explained that “Closing education settings in January is likely to lead to full or partial closures for months, until the vaccine is widespread, and will have a significant negative impact on young people and their carers, including the very real

---

<sup>406</sup> JF/454 - INQ000091091: Minutes, Covid-O 19.12.20

<sup>407</sup> JF/455 - INQ000091279: Paper - Detailed Response to the New Covid Variant 19.12.20

<sup>408</sup> JF/456 - INQ000091094: Paper - January Options for Education Settings 22.12.20

<sup>409</sup> JF/457 - INQ000091287: Actions, Covid-O 22.12.20

<sup>410</sup> JF/458 - INQ000226731: Paper - Options for Education Settings for Spring Term 2021 (DfE) 28.12.20

likelihood of having to cancel exams". The Education Secretary proposed to have primary schools back as usual on 4 January with a staggered return for secondary schools. This meant that vulnerable children and the children of key/critical workers would return to secondary schools from 4 January, followed by the exam cohort from 11 January, with all back by 18 January. The messaging to secondary schools on testing was to be hardened in order to deliver weekly testing of all secondary pupils.<sup>411</sup>

7.25. As well as concerns from other ministers - for example on how effectively schools would administer the tests - the readout recalls the advice from CSA and CMO:

7.25.1. 'The Chief Scientific Adviser outlined that whilst we don't have data to determine the spread when children are at home vs at school, but we do know that the spread has been rapid in areas with the new variant, and will go up the age ranges. We know that children do transmit and take it back into households, and that when half term occurs there is a decrease in spread. School closures do have an effect. It is clear that with this new variant, when it takes off it really takes off. This is a question about risk appetite – and whether we get ahead, or potentially end up behind. We will know a bit more by mid-January and have a clearer idea on the effectiveness of Tier 4 measures by the end of January.'

7.25.2. 'The Chief Medical Officer highlighted the regional differences which made this decision difficult. In the South, we should be doing everything we can to contain the virus and protect the NHS, whereas in the North and some parts of the Midlands progress of the virus is currently slower and action now risks looking disproportionate. But the effect in 2 to 3 weeks all over the country could mean that we look back and question whether our risk appetite now was at the right level.'

7.26. The readout further notes that 'In conclusion, the PM understood the DfE proposal and thought that the mass testing proposals sounded positive, though overall he could also see the arguments for having a lower risk appetite on opening. Decisions will need to be taken in the round this week.' He also wanted further work on the delivery plan for testing. His Private Office followed up saying the Prime Minister was extremely keen to see an overall timeline for the coming months, the best understanding of what the forward projections looked like, and on schools, a clear alternative to the DfE proposal.<sup>412</sup>

---

<sup>411</sup> JF/459 - INQ000075504: Readout 28.12.20

<sup>412</sup> JF/460 - INQ000546570: No.10 Internal Email 28.12.20

7.27. The CTF prepared a paper bringing this material together on 29 December 2020.<sup>413</sup> On schools, it said ‘we would leave primary schools open in all circumstances. The choices are:

7.27.1. ‘a. DfE model: a week’s further delay to the return of secondary schools and FE colleges to allow for the testing of students, with full face-to-face teaching from 18th’.

7.27.2. ‘b. DfE model plus stronger regional approach: deploying existing contingency framework through Gold/COVID-O to move to remote learning in secondary schools and colleges in a subset of higher prevalence Tier 4 areas where hospitals are under most pressure (excl. priority groups and exam years). This targets closures in most affected places but leads to national variation’.

7.27.3. ‘c. National remote learning: secondaries and colleges would move to remote learning until February half term (with review 18 January to see if can be returned earlier) in all parts of the country (excluding exam years and priority groups). DfE proposes rotas between remote and in-person learning (excluding exam years and priority groups), which could be considered if public health colleagues agree the impact is likely to be sufficient’.

7.28. On universities, the paper said the choices were:

7.28.1. ‘a. DfE model: continue as planned with practical students (c.700k) returning from 4 January; review 18 January whether non-practical students return from 25 January’.

7.28.2. ‘b. Restrict practical students: tighten definition of practical courses to clinical, teaching & STEM courses (c.523k students) or clinical and teaching courses only (c.223k students); we could also delay non-practical courses now’.

7.29. The Prime Minister’s Private Office communicated that on schools, the Prime Minister’s view, based on advice received to date, was in line with (b) above: that ‘we should utilise the existing contingency framework for areas with very high prevalence – i.e. currently London/Kent etc; this would err away from a blanket national approach, but we need to look further at the detail on this’; and, on universities, ‘[w]e should bear down hard on HE’.<sup>414</sup>

7.30. On 29 December 2020, COVID-O reviewed tiering across England.<sup>415</sup> As had been the case previously, the detailed information presented to the committees included breakdowns of

---

<sup>413</sup> JF/461 - INQ000546571: Paper - Approach to 30 December Review

<sup>414</sup> JF/462 - INQ000546569: Email Chain - Paper for 1500 PM C-19 Strategy Meeting 29.12.20

<sup>415</sup> JF/463 - INQ000091214: Brief, COVID-O 29.12.20; JF/464 - INQ000054395: Actions, Covid-O 29.12.20

positive cases in age ranges.<sup>416</sup> The Director for Data and Analysis in the CTF noted that the highest prevalence rates were among secondary school age children, followed by primary school age children.<sup>417</sup> The CSA noted there were signs that tier 4 might be working but decisions on schools would be important; they were currently closed and there was a high prevalence of cases in school aged children.

7.31. This topic - whether to delay the return of schools or universities in England, given the rapid spread of the new variant and the pressures on the NHS - was considered at COVID-O the same day, 29 December 2020, chaired by the Prime Minister. The Education Secretary was confident that testing could be delivered to all secondary schools, with all students getting two tests from 11 January 2021, with weekly testing thereafter. In primary schools, rollout of testing for teachers and serial testing of contacts could commence on 18 January 2020, although they would return on 4 January 2020 as always had been the plan - except in areas of high prevalence. Return for secondary schools was to be staggered as previously proposed, with vulnerable children and children of critical workers to return to secondary school from 4 January 2021, while students in exam years would return from 11 January 2021 (one week later than the original plan); and all other secondary year groups on 18 January 2021, with remote education from 11 January. The Education Secretary maintained that the proposed plan was the best way to mitigate the amount of time children would lose in their education, which would affect children from disadvantaged families the most. He said that children would not stop mixing just because schools were closed, and that while reopening schools was not without risk, mass testing was in place and there was a contingency framework

7.32. The minute<sup>418</sup> records, 'Summing up, the Prime Minister said that the Government had prioritised education throughout the pandemic. The Committee had agreed that there was a system to decide if outbreaks of the virus were so out of control that the Government would take contingency measures. It was essential to move heaven and earth to get children back, and overwhelmingly primary children should go back on 4 January. But in some areas, cases were so high that some primary schools would have to delay the start of term. A final list should be agreed the next morning between the Secretaries of State for Education and Health and Social Care...the Committee had agreed the measures proposed for secondary schools: that exam years should return from 11 January and other pupils from 18 January. There would be serial testing where there was a positive case to prevent whole bubbles self

---

<sup>416</sup> JF/465 - INQ000091111: PHE and JBS Data Pack – Local Action Committee Silver and Gold SE and E England 28.12.20; JF/466 - INQ000091112: PHE and JBS Local Action Committee Silver and Gold Situation Report 28.12.20

<sup>417</sup> JF/467 - INQ000091113: Minutes, Covid-O 18:00 29.12.20

<sup>418</sup> JF/468 - INQ000091117: Minutes, Covid-O 19.30 29.12.20

isolating and there would be mass testing for all pupils as set out. The Committee should not be faint hearted about testing. For universities, the number of students returning on 4 January should be reduced to around 20 per cent of the cohort as proposed’.

- 7.33. The Prime Minister announced this on 30 December 2020, along with the news that the Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine had been approved.

*The decision to close schools in January 2021*

- 7.34. Over the subsequent days, concerns increased about the rise in infections across all ages. The Cabinet Office led work to consider options for a stronger response, including whether to continue with the incremental regional approach or move to a national approach.

- 7.35. On 2 January 2021, CDL provided the Prime Minister with a note<sup>419</sup> warning that the situation was, in the immediate term, grave, and that stronger restrictions should be in place nationwide in order to control the spread of the virus. This included applying Tier 4 restrictions across England alongside ‘stay at home’ messaging. On education, CDL advised:

7.35.1. ‘Closing all secondary schools until the February half-term. We can make exceptions for vulnerable children and those of key workers. We should also push back the return of HE students to - at least - the same timeframe, except for a small number of those on practical courses (such as medical students). If we are to hold the line on continuing with exams, we must also commit immediately to working with school leaders to reclaim teaching time through longer school days and/or shorter holidays’

7.35.2. ‘Closing primaries across the country in the same way as we have in London - until at least 18 January. I suspect we may have to keep them closed until the end of January, but I recognise the increased economic and social costs of closing schools for younger children’.

- 7.36. CDL noted the risk of ‘schools opting to close because of a combination of staff absences and parents holding their children back. I have already heard from headteachers in my constituency that this is a real risk’.

- 7.37. On 3 January 2021, the Head of the CTF updated No.10 on the COVID-O planned for the next day, regarding potential school and tier changes. It was proposed that the COVID-O discussion focus on whether to continue with the incremental approach on schools and tiers,

---

<sup>419</sup> JF/469 - INQ000184013: CDL Note to PM 02.01.21

or move to a national approach, with a wider package of measures set out.<sup>420</sup> Later on the same day, the Head of the CTF updated No.10 again on the Health Secretary's preference for a national lockdown.<sup>421</sup>

7.38. COVID-O met the following day, 4 January 2021<sup>422</sup> to consider a proposition for a new national intervention, based on advice produced by the CTF as a result of its work with analysts, data scientists and scientific experts across government and in the context of data showing the situation was deteriorating rapidly.<sup>423</sup> This was centred on a strong 'stay at home' message across the country as a final push before the rollout of the vaccine provided for a gradual easing of restrictions. In respect of education the proposal recommended:

7.38.1. 'Moving secondary schools and colleges online across England, with the exception of vulnerable children, the children of key workers, and - possibly - exam years. Delay exam years' return to 18th Jan if return face to face'.

7.38.2. 'A further delay to the return of higher education settings. Non-practical and non-critical worker practical courses (e.g. Science, Engineering, Performing Arts), amounting to around 80% of all students, would not return until the end of February, in addition to the 20% who returned in January who study critical-worker practical courses (e.g. Nursing, Teaching, Medicine)'.

7.39. If necessary to go further, the options of most relevance to children included:

7.39.1. 'Moving primary schools online, except for vulnerable children and children of critical workers. This should be a last resort. This could be done either by moving all areas into the contingency framework (allowing us to release them on a local basis) or by a separate national decision. If we go ahead with closing primary schools, we may want to commit to a review date part way through the lockdown - for example, in the last week of January - to see if return, even in some areas, is possible sooner'.

7.39.2. 'The closure of nurseries and other childcare providers to all but vulnerable children and critical workers' children - this is similar to primary schools. Specialist schools and alternative provision would stay open as in March, as these pupils are vulnerable or require unique educational support'.

---

<sup>420</sup> JF/470 - INQ000546568: Email Exchange 03.01.21

<sup>421</sup> JF/471 - INQ000546567: Email Exchange 03.01.21

<sup>422</sup> JF/472 - INQ000146739: Minutes, Covid-O 04.01.21

<sup>423</sup> JF/473 - INQ000146740: Paper – Proposition for New National Intervention 04.01.21

- 7.39.3. 'Limiting outdoor exercise/recreation to single households/bubbles i.e. not with one other person'.
- 7.39.4. 'Closing paid-for open spaces (such as zoos and botanical gardens), outdoor sports venues, and/or outdoor playgrounds. We would need to justify why these spaces were distinct from parks/countryside, given the long-standing rationale that outdoor open spaces are safer - playgrounds in particular are very important to those on lower incomes, who have no private outdoor space.'
- 7.40. Several measures were explicitly not recommended for this announcement. Of most relevance to children: 'We could cancel support and childcare bubbles, returning to the position in March, but this will cause social and economic harm (e.g. through increased isolation and reducing the availability of childcare to enable parents to work). Instead, we can clarify in our messaging who is eligible for support bubbles and that they should be used for essential reasons (i.e. providing support or care) and not for socialising. Adults should avoid close contact even with their support bubble. In extremis, we could limit the reasons for which someone could lawfully change their bubble or increase the time needed between changes'.
- 7.41. COVID-O agreed to move to national lockdown. Summing up, the Prime Minister said "that secondary school reopening should be pushed further to the right, but a clear timetable for reopening was needed. There would be implications for exams and answers would be needed that day. Closing primary schools should be the last resort and there was an argument to keep them open in areas where the disease was not out of control. However the mood of the Committee was to move all provision online."<sup>424</sup>
- 7.42. A Cabinet Call was convened on 4 January 2021 at which the Prime Minister explained that the Government was obliged to take further steps to deal with the virus, setting out the data including that the new variant was driving an "alarming" rise in new cases - now three times higher than at the start of December.<sup>425</sup>
- 7.43. Advice prepared by the CTF updated Cabinet on the plans,<sup>426</sup> including the closure of schools except to the vulnerable and children of critical workers. Early years provision was to stay open. University provision was to remain online except for future critical worker courses. Restrictions on primary and secondary schools, colleges and HEIs was expected to have a moderate impact on transmission, but the closure of schools was acknowledged as creating further disruptions to education, particularly those children from lower income households

<sup>424</sup> JF/472 - INQ000146739: Minutes, Covid-O 04.01.21

<sup>425</sup> JF/474 - INQ000088943: Cabinet Call minute 04.01.21

<sup>426</sup> JF/475 - INQ000088942: Paper - January National Intervention 04.01.21

with limited access to the internet. The closures were expected to have a disproportionate impact on women responsible for the majority of childcare and homeschooling, although the exemptions for childcare and support bubbles and the continued opening of early years settings would help mitigate this.

- 7.44. The change in approach was addressed in the Cabinet Call and it was acknowledged that there would be questions over the decision to have allowed schools to have opened earlier that week. The Prime Minister explained that “the Government had been doing everything possible to keep schools open as a priority, but there was no question that schools were contributing to the spread of coronavirus. Measures to stem the tide of the virus would not be successful without including schools in the new restrictions.” The decision to close schools was to be kept under review.<sup>427</sup> CDL then convened a call with the First Ministers of the devolved administrations to set out the plans for the further lockdown the UK Government was intending to put in place. The measures were to be announced the next day.<sup>428</sup>
- 7.45. On 4 January 2021, the Prime Minister announced the third national lockdown and that “primary schools, secondary schools and colleges across England must move to remote provision from tomorrow, except for vulnerable children and the children of key workers”. He addressed why the decision had not been taken sooner by saying “we have been doing everything in our power to keep schools open, because we know how important each day in education is to children's life chances. And I want to stress that the problem is not that schools are unsafe for children - children are still very unlikely to be severely affected by even the new variant of Covid. The problem is that schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission, causing the virus to spread between households.” It was explained that those entitled to free school meals would continue to receive them. It was recognised that it was not possible for all exams to go ahead and that the Education Secretary would work with Ofqual on alternative arrangements. Early years provision such as nurseries were to stay open. The Prime Minister went on to explain that it was the government's intention to “steadily move out of lockdown, reopening schools after the February half term and starting, cautiously, to move regions down the tiers” if the vaccine rollout continued to be successful.
- 7.46. The Education Gold Meeting on 13 January 2021 was focused on the provision of remote devices and attendance.<sup>429</sup> During 2020, 560,000 devices had been delivered to schools and local authorities. A further 1 million devices would be provided by the week commencing 18 January 2020 and 300,000 more devices would be provided in February. It was highlighted

---

<sup>427</sup> JF/474 - INQ000088943: Cabinet Call Minutes, 04.01.21

<sup>428</sup> JF/476 - INQ000086664: Public Address - Prime Minister's Address to the Nation 04.01.21

<sup>429</sup> JF/477 - INQ000546630: Agenda, Education Gold 13.01.21; JF/478 - INQ000546627: Actions and Decisions, Education Gold 13.01.21

that the global demand for devices was unprecedented and February was the earliest the manufacturing and supply chain could provide the additional stock. In total, 1.3 million devices would be supplied, meaning that the total number of devices in school and FE would be commensurate with the number of year 3-13 pupils eligible for free school meals in England. To increase support to FE settings the programme would be extended to 16-19 year olds.<sup>430</sup>

- 7.47. The SitRep<sup>431</sup> highlighted that the vast majority of state schools were open to vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, with 1 in 3 vulnerable children attending face-to-face. Overall, 14% of children were in attendance which comprised 33% of children with an EHCP, 40% of children with a social worker and 72% of children of critical workers. The vast majority (99%) of schools were providing remote learning in line with guidance. The SitRep included an update on free school meals provision, with food parcels and vouchers from schools being provided for those children not in attendance. A national voucher scheme was being set up as a contingency approach, and was anticipated to launch in the week of 18 January 2021. There were a number of cross-cutting actions arising from the meeting on the CTF, DfE, DHSC, JBC, PHE on communication, the procurement of devices and testing - reflective of the Cabinet Office's role to focus attention on priority issues and coordinate the wider response.<sup>432</sup>

*Guidance on use of playgrounds during the January 2021 lockdown period*

- 7.48. Decisions on playgrounds, like other decisions made in response to the Alpha variant, were taken in the context of a fast-moving situation. They were consistent with decisions on schools and taken in line with what was understood about transmission. As with education, the general approach was to close playgrounds for the least amount of time possible. The reopening of playgrounds was carefully considered, taking into account the impacts on children, and transmission between them, the accompanying adults and the wider community.
- 7.49. The Inquiry has asked for information on Cabinet Office involvement in the changes made to playgrounds guidance in January 2021. These changes formed part of an update in mid-January 2021 which strengthened 'stay-at-home' messaging to improve compliance with the third lockdown.

---

<sup>430</sup> JF/479 - INQ000546632: Paper - Get Help with Tech Delivery Position 12.01.21

<sup>431</sup> JF/480 - INQ000542601: Covid Taskforce SitRep 11.01.21

<sup>432</sup> JF/478 - INQ000546627: Actions & Decisions, Education Gold 13.01.21

- 7.50. A CTF paper<sup>433</sup> for the COVID-O (Officials) meeting on 10 January 2021 recommended advising against the use of playgrounds for those with access to private outdoor space. An updated version of this paper<sup>434</sup> - laying out how stronger messaging on playgrounds might reduce transmission of the new variant - was then assessed by a Ministerial COVID-O chaired by CDL on 10 January 2021.
- 7.51. The issue was further discussed at the later COVID-O meeting on 10 January 2021, chaired by the Prime Minister<sup>435</sup>, which agreed to the recommendations in the paper, and work was taken forward to strengthen lockdown messaging. Government guidance, coordinated by the Cabinet Office was updated on 14 January 2021, and on 15 January 2021 MHCLG officials contacted the Cabinet Office requesting clarification<sup>436</sup> on the position regarding playgrounds, given the high level of media attention and several cases of playgrounds being closed by businesses and local authorities. Cabinet Office officials clarified that playgrounds were to remain open, and that stronger messaging on playgrounds was being readied. Officials recommended that the new messaging - that playgrounds were open “primarily” for the use of children without access to private outdoor space - was replicated in MHCLG guidance and communications once public. The government guidance on the national lockdown was updated the same day using the wording communicated to MHCLG.<sup>437</sup> On 11 February 2021, the position on playgrounds was restated to the media by both the Cabinet Office and No.10 Press Offices.<sup>438</sup>

---

<sup>433</sup> JF/481 - INQ000091628: Paper - Options for Strengthening Lockdown 10.01.21

<sup>434</sup> JF/482 - INQ000234704: Paper - Options for Strengthening Lockdown 10.01.21 (FINAL)

<sup>435</sup> JF/483 - INQ000091649: Minute - Covid-O 10.01.21 18:00, JF/484 - INQ000092259: Actions - Covid-O 10.01.21 18:00.

<sup>436</sup> JF/485 - INQ000622773: Email - MHCLG / CTF on playgrounds 15.01.21

<sup>437</sup> JF/486 - INQ000622795: Guidance - 'National lockdown Stay at Home' 04.01.21 updated 14.02.21

<sup>438</sup> JF/487 - INQ000622772: Email No.10 / Cabinet Office Press Office / CTF on playground media lines 11.02.21

## 8. EDUCATION REOPENING AND RECOVERY - LATE JANUARY TO AUTUMN 2021

### Summary

- 8.1. From January 2021, Cabinet Office worked to lead and coordinate strategic discussions focused on the safe return of students to educational institutions. Decision-making on the reopening of education settings was primarily led by COVID-O, with the CTF continually providing papers to inform the decisions on reopening. Following advice from the CTF and DfE, COVID-O set a date of 8 March 2021 for the full return of schools, colleges and university students on practical courses. As schools prepared to reopen, the Cabinet Office, led by the CTF, undertook work with OGDs to develop measures including the ongoing use of face coverings and regular testing for students and staff. The Government endeavoured to reassure parents and the public about the safety of schools. Concerns about the negative impacts of prolonged school closures on vulnerable children were addressed, with plans initiated to support these students in particular.
- 8.2. As schools reopened from 8 March 2021, the Government repeatedly underscored the importance of continual assessment and communication to maintain public confidence in the safety and integrity of educational environments. Meetings and collaborative efforts persisted throughout the spring and summer to ensure that educational settings adapted effectively in response to evolving public health guidance. As the UK proceeded to each step of the Spring Roadmap (the Roadmap) published in February 2021, COVID-O, Education Gold and other decision making forums met regularly to assess the effect of each step, including upon children and young people, and education settings in particular. For instance, COVID-O met on 28 April 2020<sup>439</sup> and agreed to proceed to Step 3 of the Roadmap, including the removal of face coverings guidance for education settings and the return of in-person teaching for HE.
- 8.3. In the months following the reopening of schools, Education Gold meetings worked to support the safe operation and recovery of education settings. Throughout January and February 2021, Gold meetings reviewed SitReps and evaluated public health data relating to school attendance and transmission rates. Meetings during this period focused on ensuring that schools were prepared to reopen safely, based on public health recommendations and testing capabilities. As the UK proceeded to each step of the Roadmap, Education Gold continued to monitor and adjust strategies based on real-time feedback and emerging data regarding the pandemic's trajectory. Meetings included discussions on support measures needed for effective testing and monitoring of attendance and enrollment throughout the

---

<sup>439</sup> JF/488 - INQ000092444: Actions, Covid-O, 28.04.21

reopening process. Additionally, the group identified the essential need to address the educational disparities exacerbated by the pandemic, focusing on the welfare and mental health of students, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds.

- 8.4. In light of the reopening of the economy and removal of restrictions, the Cabinet Office coordinated and fed into extensive discussions on vaccination for children and young people. COVID-O met a number of times on this issue, and decisions were consistently taken in line with advice from the JCVI. In August and September 2021, as the JCVI recommended vaccination for those aged 16-17, and then for those aged 12-15, the Cabinet Office worked with OGDs to quickly develop plans for rollout to these age groups, and to encourage children and young people to come forward for vaccination.
- 8.5. The government also recognised the need for a comprehensive recovery plan to address the educational gaps that had emerged due to the pandemic's impact on schooling. An Education Recovery Commissioner was appointed to support recovering lost learning for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Significant funding was allocated to facilitate tutoring programmes and expand access to resources for schools, with the aim of ensuring that children were not left behind in the recovery efforts.
- 8.6. From February 2021, the National Economic Recovery Taskforce (Public Services) (NERT(PS) - see 2.18 above) undertook substantial work with the objective of addressing lost learning and facilitating the recovery of educational services impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. NERT(PS) set lost learning as one of three critical areas for phase one of the committee's work, and began with initial meetings to assess the scale and nature of the issue, and the quality of data on lost learning. NERT(PS) facilitated the collection of robust data to establish a baseline for lost learning, enabling targeted support measures to be devised. The committee assessed a range of policy options aimed at mitigating the educational impact of the pandemic, agreeing on the need for tailored approaches that would consider the unique challenges faced by different pupil demographics. NERT(PS) also worked to address issues relating to the welfare and mental health of children affected by prolonged isolation and disrupted schooling, as well as the issue of persistent absence following school closures. NERT(PS) worked to develop strategies for engagement and outreach as part of the recovery plan, coordinating with departments and setting actions for CTF, DfE and others to develop detailed policy options to support recovery.

#### Discussions on reopening of education

- 8.7. On 20 January 2021, the Prime Minister and Chancellor discussed COVID-19 strategy, joined by the CMO and CSA as well as officials from No.10 and the CTF. The readout from

the meeting notes that the peak of cases may have been reached, with admissions and death expected to fall in due course. It was acknowledged, however, that levels were very high with '15k more in hospital than the previous peak' and uncertainty around 'the gradient of the downslope of cases' given that 'It took two months for the first wave to fall from 19k admissions to 5k; vaccinations could speed this up, the new variant could apply upward pressure'.<sup>440</sup>

- 8.8. The Education Secretary had guaranteed the education sector a minimum of two weeks' notice of an announcement to confirm when pupils will return. Accordingly, given the dates of half-term, the readout notes, 'We needed to decide on schools by the 8th [February] latest. If we can do this earlier, that would be better'.
- 8.9. The medium-term strategy proposal prepared by the CTF outlined the key objective to be restoring freedoms as sustainably and quickly as possible by prioritising the return of schools, as well as opening businesses and social contact (in that order) without overwhelming the NHS - and avoiding another lockdown in mid/late 2021. The proposal noted that returning schools required: (i) a public health-led recommendation that it was safe for schools to return; (ii) a robust and clear testing plan; (iii) a position on vaccines for the teaching workforce; and (iv) engagement and communications with parents and the schools sector with advanced notice. The advice included public health projections and possible scenarios which considered when and how far to ease restrictions. On that basis, a number of policy questions were set out (i) when to communicate expectations on returning; (ii) whether to stagger primary, secondary, and HEIs; (iii) regional or national reopening; and (iv) extending teaching time, including changing term times and hours.<sup>441</sup>
- 8.10. The Prime Minister noted the clear risks of opening too early. He wanted to look at options where some children might return on 22 Feb, but wanted to understand what the impact on the path of the virus would be in this situation including what testing support would be available. The Prime Minister agreed that opening and closing schools to any additional cohorts should be avoided.
- 8.11. An Education Gold meeting was held on 21 January 2021 and considered the weekly SitRep<sup>442</sup> and a paper providing an update on public health issues for children and young people which included the impacts of school closures on community transmission both nationally and locally.<sup>443</sup> Among other factors, the SitRep outlined the percentage of schools

---

<sup>440</sup> JF/489 - INQ000063257: Email Readout 20.01.21

<sup>441</sup> JF/490 - INQ000249586: Slides COVID-19 Medium Term Strategy 20.01.21

<sup>442</sup> JF/491 - INQ000546629: Covid Taskforce SitRep 18.01.21

<sup>443</sup> JF/492 - INQ000546628: Paper – Update on Public Health issues for Children and Young People January 2021

open and attendance rates for critical worker and vulnerable children. Over 99% of schools remained open with the vast majority able to meet the demand for places. Of the 83.4% of schools that responded with data, 99.2% were open to the children of critical workers and vulnerable children. School and attendance figures continued to reflect similar trends to the previous week and attendance for vulnerable children's groups had increased slightly, whilst attendance for critical worker children had decreased slightly. Attendance remained higher in areas with lower COVID-19 rates. The SitRep outlined that based on SAGE advice and recent JBC/PHE views, current attendance was not expected to drive infection rates and there was no evidence to suggest this was happening.

- 8.12. The latter paper from PHE on public health issues covered two broad areas i) the pandemic response and impact on children and education, and ii) wider public health issues and impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable children. It outlined that whilst patterns of transmission were being monitored in varying age groups, it was difficult to ascribe place of transmission. As such, the evidential basis to assess the impact of school closures on community transmissions was not classed as strong. However, when schools were closed in the first lockdown, and in the recent half term break, there had been a marked decrease in community cases. It also explained that no setting could be made 100% COVID-19 secure, and therefore it was not possible to provide specific safety limits for school attendance, however there were principles that could be taken into account.
- 8.13. The PHE paper also highlighted concern about the indirect and hidden harms on children and young people, especially those who were vulnerable, and outlined a range of work being undertaken across government and health systems to identify these children and young people and to prevent or mitigate these harms. The 'Framework for Action on Vulnerability in Childhood during Covid Response and Recovery'<sup>444</sup> had been developed with a national stakeholders group chaired by DfE, with "multiagency national to local" strands of work led by NHS, DfE and PHE. The framework was designed to:
- 8.13.1. Improve understanding of the multiple impacts on vulnerable children from the pandemic and response.
  - 8.13.2. Provide a common language to enable understanding of breadth of vulnerability and reduce the risks of missing some vulnerable groups.
  - 8.13.3. Map multiple mitigations activities at national and local levels.
  - 8.13.4. Coordinate efforts nationally and locally.

---

<sup>444</sup> JF/493 - INQ000546702 Paper - Vulnerability Framework 27.11.20

8.13.5. Improve data/quantification.

8.13.6. Support place based/local work

Oversight of the implementation of this framework was coordinated through the NHS Keeping Children Well workstream which reported to the DfE Vulnerabilities Board. The DfE would be best placed to provide further information on the programme of work.

8.14. The Gold meeting resulted in a range of actions and information requests for departments. Among the actions for DfE were mapping out a phased reopening of settings on a timetable including term dates, and DfE's preferred sequencing of FE and HE priority groups in parallel to a phased reopening. The CTF and DfE were to discuss use of internal attendance targets for vulnerable children in the upcoming VCYP Steering Group meeting. DHSC agreed to share the full list of considerations to be taken into account as part of reopening decisions.<sup>445</sup>

8.15. The CTF provided advice to the Prime Minister on 22 January 2021 which noted: 'Any decision on the return of pupils to education settings must be evidence-based and public health-led, taken in light of the most recent data, and with confidence that the decision will not be quickly reversed'. Relevant considerations included a clear and operationalised testing programme and teacher vaccination. The note recommended 'that, subject to discussion with the Education Secretary, you delay schools, colleges and universities opening until at least 8 March [2021]. Between now and then we will develop and agree an overall plan to manage prevalence sustainably and exit lockdown covering education, the economy and reopening society more widely. This will need to align with other key government decisions, including the Budget on 3 March [2021]'.<sup>446</sup>

8.16. Also on 22 January 2021, the Education Secretary wrote to the Prime Minister - copying other Secretaries of State as relevant. He wrote: 'As a government we worked hard to keep schools and colleges fully open before the lockdown was announced and I am very keen that we can allow all children to return as soon as possible, ideally from 22nd February'. His strong preference was to announce on 29th January a move to full, national reopening across all education. The Education Secretary added, 'I do realise that this decision has to be made on current public health data' so also put forward an alternative, staggered return<sup>447</sup>. The Prime Minister's overall comment was, 'OK - all this to be fed into the PLAN'.<sup>448</sup>

8.17. A COVID-O meeting on 22 January 2021 focused on increasing compliance with self-isolation. A paper from DHSC proposed that the Test and Trace Support Payment

---

<sup>445</sup> JF/478 - INQ000546627: Actions and Decisions, Education Gold 21.01.21

<sup>446</sup> JF/494 - INQ000249604: Paper - Medium Term Strategy 22.01.21

<sup>447</sup> JF/495 - INQ000546734: Letter to the PM from Education Secretary 22.01.21

<sup>448</sup> JF/496 - INQ000546735: Annotated Letter to the PM from Education Secretary and Box Return 24.01.21

(‘TTSP’) should be extended to parents/guardians (one per household) in England who were taking time off work to look after a child who was in nursery or primary school, or a secondary school child with support needs, who had tested positive for COVID-19. This proposal was agreed by HMT.<sup>449</sup> The proposal was supported by the Health Secretary<sup>450</sup> and a decision was made to expand the eligibility for the TTSP to parents of children who tested positive.<sup>451</sup> It was discussed in the meeting that it was important that young students would not be motivated by the compensation scheme to catch the virus.

- 8.18. At a Cabinet meeting on 26 January 2021, the Prime Minister stated he had been keen to keep schools open but was equally keen to ensure they were not reopened prematurely, and that schools returned as fast as was reasonable and safe. He also acknowledged the work of the Education Secretary “in getting computers to children who needed them for online learning and supporting parents in need.”<sup>452</sup>
- 8.19. On 27 January 2021, COVID-O considered advice from the CTF titled ‘National Intervention - Timing for Reopening Schools’<sup>453</sup> which recommended that the reopening of schools, colleges, and universities would be delayed until at least 8 March 2021. Points discussed in this paper included: (i) that the latest estimates from SPI-M showed a noticeable uptick in the R number in the 17-24 age group; (ii) England was at or near its peak of hospitalisations (at around 12,000 more than the peak of the previous spring); (iii) that SAGE estimated schools contributed 0.2 to 0.5 (HE and FE contributing an additional 0.3) to the R number and therefore the R number would be pushed above 1 if schools, colleges and universities reopened. The CTF noted that the worst position would be to resume face-to-face learning and then need to close schools again. There was a vaccination rationale for a 8 March 2021 date – the vaccine took up to three weeks to start providing protection after the first dose and 8 March 2021 was three weeks after the deadline for offering all in cohorts 1-4 a vaccine. The CTF acknowledged that delaying the return of more pupils to face-to-face education would likely exacerbate ongoing negative social and economic impacts from closures, including the widening attainment gap (particularly for the most disadvantaged students), and harming mental and physical and health outcomes. The CTF’s paper included DfE’s recommended prioritisation for the return of cohorts: 1) FE and HE critical priority courses; 2) reception and Key Stage 1; 3) Key Stage 2; 4) exam years (10-13); 5) remaining HE and FE practical students; 6) remaining secondary years (7-9); and 7) remaining HE and FE students.

<sup>449</sup> JF/497 - INQ000091673: Paper – Removing Barriers to Self-Isolation and Improving Adherence 22.01.21

<sup>450</sup> JF/498 - INQ000092295: Draft Minute, Covid-O 22.01.21

<sup>451</sup> JF/499 - INQ000054522: Actions and Decisions, Covid-O 22.01.21

<sup>452</sup> JF/500 - INQ000089080: Minutes, Cabinet 26.01.2021

<sup>453</sup> JF/501 - INQ000075532: Paper - National Intervention Time for Resuming Face to Face Learning 27.01.21

- 8.20. The recommendations in the paper were as follows: (i) that pupils not currently eligible to attend schools and colleges would not resume face to face learning until at least 8 March 2021, and would continue to learn remotely; (ii) to prioritise those with the greatest need to be physically present including bringing back primary school pupils before secondary pupils and prioritising the students in HE and FE that require practical teaching; (iii) honour the commitment to give parents and teachers 2 weeks' notice in advance of pupils returning; and (iv) early years settings would continue to remain open for all children. The paper noted that DfE and HMT were discussing funding to extend Free Schools Meals while most children were not eligible to attend school and discussing a hardship package for HE, and further that DfE continued to distribute the remaining portion of the 1.3 million devices for disadvantaged children – having delivered over 876,000 devices by 24 January.
- 8.21. At COVID-O, the Prime Minister stated that “the right way forward was to set the earliest possible date by which schools would return, namely 8 March 2021. Schools would then have a few weeks to plan as the Government would be able to make decisions based on the data and evidence from the vaccination programme.” Data on the efficacy of the vaccination programme was expected by 15 February 2021 and the Prime Minister wanted to see clear evidence that the vaccine worked before allowing schools to reopen. The Prime Minister explained the concern that “reopening schools would add to ‘R’ (the transmission rate of the virus) in the community, which would have a negative impact on large numbers of the most vulnerable people - and ultimately mean lots of deaths.”
- 8.22. The Education Secretary explained his preference for 22 February 2021 as the return date. (This had been set out to the PM directly and other Ministers in his letter of 22 January). In the meeting, the Education Secretary recognised that this “had to be balanced with a totality of other issues”, in which case a ‘Plan B’ should be agreed which prioritised the return of children and young people by cohorts. For example, reception age children should be prioritised as they could not learn remotely and there would be economic benefits from parents returning to work.
- 8.23. The CMO stated that he was confident that the Government would have more solid data by mid-February to make a clear decision, adding that the earlier the Government reopened schools, the less room for manoeuvre there would be to relax other measures.<sup>454</sup>
- 8.24. The Committee agreed that::
- 8.24.1. The Prime Minister would announce in Parliament that the earliest that remaining pupils would return to face-to-face education would be 8 March 2021, and that this

---

<sup>454</sup> JF/502 - INQ000091687: Minutes, Covid-O 27.01.21

date would be reviewed by COVID-O in the week of 15 February 2021 taking into account the latest data, including the effectiveness of the vaccination roll out;

8.24.2. the prioritisation order for a staggered return set out in the paper presented to them was acceptable, in the event that it was not possible to deliver the ambition to return all pupils on 8 March 2021 – noting that this was internal and not to be published; and,

8.24.3. a technical change would be made to allow 46,000 critical worker students on practical FE courses to return to education.

8.24.4. There were additional actions for DfE, HMT and CO to agree a package of catch up support for students, and for DfE to continue working with HMT, No.10 and the Cabinet Office on delivering mitigations for students, including on free school meals, hardship funding, testing and devices.

8.25. Later on 27 January 2021, the Prime Minister announced that “if we are to get schools open – and keep them open – which is what we all want[,] then we need to be clear about certain things. We need to be sure the vaccine roll-out is continuing to be successful as it is[,] and most important, we need to see the impact of our vaccines on those graphs of mortality, we need to see that they really are saving lives and preventing people from becoming seriously ill. Now we are confident that will happen and vaccines will have that effect[,] but to be responsible we must see the proof. And our current estimates say that the proof will only become visible in the middle of February. And since we need to give schools two weeks’ notice to re-open[,] it is sensible now to serve notice that we will not be able to re-open schools immediately after half-term on 22nd February. But if we continue to make the progress that we want to see, and that we believe we can see, then we hope to begin opening schools on Monday 8th March”.<sup>455</sup> An Education Gold meeting took place the following day to consider the DfE’s communication campaign and the education roadmap for 2021.<sup>456</sup>

8.26. The weekly SitRep provided for an Education Gold meeting on 4 February 2021 outlined that 99% of schools had remained open and attendance rates had increased slightly to 15%; 94% of colleges had remained open and attendance was at 1.3% and around 20% of HE students were in attendance. An estimated 78% of early years settings were open with around 59% attendance. The attendance rates of vulnerable children were reported as remaining stable in the last two weeks of January with some safeguarding pressures

---

<sup>455</sup> JF/503 - INQ000542877: Statement - Prime Minister’s Statement on Coronavirus 27.01.21

<sup>456</sup> JF/504 - INQ000546626: Email 28.01.21; JF/505 - INQ000595197: DfE Slides for Education Gold 04.02.21

highlighted. Almost all schools had reported providing remote education in line with the guidance.<sup>457</sup> The meeting also reviewed a DfE slidepack on reopening education<sup>458</sup> and agreed a range of actions to support the further development of reopening plans.<sup>459</sup>

- 8.27. From early February to early March 2021, when educational settings reopened, the weekly DfE/CTF meetings had a heightened focus on remote education. SitRep data included the provision of devices, access to remote education, the quality of remote education and the level of support being deployed across the sector. Using this data, the CTF was able to monitor delivery, identify emerging issues and work with DfE to drive up standards.<sup>460</sup>

### Broader issues

- 8.28. More broadly at this time there was work ongoing to strengthen measures at the border so as to help protect against new variants, and consideration about the impacts of these measures on children and young people. On 8 February 2021 COVID-O discussed managed quarantine and mandatory testing. A paper by DHSC outlined that both DCMS and the Ministry of Defence suggested that unaccompanied children should be exempt from managed quarantine (with particular reference to children returning to boarding school). It was considered that the current drafting of the regulations allowed a parent or guardian to join an unaccompanied child in quarantine. This paper also noted that, if needed, for HE students travelling from overseas, there was the possibility for universities to offer up halls/accommodation as an alternative to hotel quarantine subject to university accommodation meeting the strict public health bar.<sup>461</sup> There was agreement by the Committee with the proposals within the paper.<sup>462</sup>
- 8.29. COVID-O met on 9 February 2021 to discuss phase 2 of the vaccine roll-out. The Committee were updated on the progress of vaccine prioritisation, noting that cohorts one to nine would be completed by the mid to end of April, with the need to decide on prioritisation after that. In discussion, the point was made that those facing the public, like teachers, would be at greatest risk and most likely to spread the virus. In discussion, it was acknowledged that there may be a point where the “best way to reduce transmissibility may be to focus on younger age groups.” The potential challenges to this were discussed, such as a minimum age for vaccines - meaning campaigns for younger ages would need careful consideration -

---

<sup>457</sup> JF/506 - INQ000542640: Covid Taskforce SitRep 04.02.21

<sup>458</sup> JF/507 - INQ000546625: DfE Slides – Reopening Education 04.02.21

<sup>459</sup> JF/508 - INQ000546624: Actions and Decisions, Education Gold 04.02.21

<sup>460</sup> For example, see JF/509 - INQ000546623; JF/510 - INQ000546619; JF/511 - INQ000541100: Covid Taskforce SitRep 22.02.21

<sup>461</sup> JF/512 - INQ000108596: Paper – Exemptions to the Managed Quarantine Service DHSC (Annex B) 08.02.21

<sup>462</sup> JF/513 - INQ000108604: Minutes, Covid-O 08.02.21; JF/514 - INQ000108600: Actions & Decisions, Covid-O 08.02.21

and groups may also be more vaccine hesitant.<sup>463</sup> The Committee decided that the approach for phase 2 vaccine prioritisation would continue to be led by science and based on JCVI advice on how best to reduce mortality, morbidity, and hospitalisation, rather than looking to prioritise a specific workforce or sectors.<sup>464</sup>

- 8.30. COVID-O again discussed the prioritisation of phase 2 of the vaccine roll-out on 25 February 2021. The JCVI had “looked at all the different considerations, including whether to prioritise vaccinations by occupation, targeting those who engaged in significant contact with the public, such as teachers and policemen.” There were two significant problems with an occupation-based approach. First, it would be challenging and therefore operationally slower to implement an occupation-based priority list. Second, communicating the increased complexity by deciding between professions would be more difficult.<sup>465</sup> The Committee decided that the approach for phase 2 vaccine prioritisation would continue to be led by science and based on JCVI advice on how best to reduce mortality, morbidity, and hospitalisation, rather than looking to prioritise a specific workforce or sector.<sup>466</sup>

#### Preparations for the reopening of schools

- 8.31. In setting the strategy for re-opening, it remained the government's intention that schools would open first, to minimise the impact on children's educational attainment and wellbeing.
- 8.32. An Education Gold meeting on 11 February 2021 considered, alongside the usual SitRep,<sup>467</sup> a slide deck from DfE on reopening education.<sup>468</sup> This recalled that a contingency framework for managing Covid-19 in education and childcare settings had been approved by COVID-O and published in November 2020. It had since been revised, and was ready for use to guide decision-making around whether to apply, tighten or relax restrictions to education and childcare. Decisions would flow up through the JBC-led Bronze, Silver, Gold weekly cadence of meetings and ultimately to COVID-O. The Contingency Framework was to be updated on 22 February 2021.<sup>469</sup>
- 8.33. At this time, the CTF was coordinating a broader roadmap for the lifting of restrictions. One of the actions from the Gold meeting was for DfE to share their latest roadmap drafting with

---

<sup>463</sup> JF/515 - INQ000091773: Minutes, Covid-O 09.02.21

<sup>464</sup> JF/516 - INQ000092349: Actions & Decisions, Covid-O 09.02.21

<sup>465</sup> JF/517 - INQ000092369: Draft Minutes, Covid-O 25.02.21

<sup>466</sup> JF/518 - INQ000092368: Actions & Decisions, Covid-O 25.02.21

<sup>467</sup> JF/509 - INQ000546623: Covid Taskforce SitRep 11.02.21

<sup>468</sup> JF/519 - INQ000546622: Slides – Reopening Education, Education Gold 11.02.21

<sup>469</sup> JF/520 - INQ000546837: Email from DfE with links to guidance 22.02.21. NB This version of the guidance does not appear on the UK Webarchive and should be sought from DfE if required.

the CTF and the JBC, and for the CTF to work with DfE on the health indicators that would be used to inform roadmap decisions.<sup>470</sup>

- 8.34. COVID-O on 15 February 2021 addressed testing in schools. The purpose of the meeting was for ministers to agree the delivery plan which DfE and DHSC set out for testing in education settings from 8 March 2021 onwards (this being the earliest date for the full return of schools, as previously announced by the Prime Minister).<sup>471</sup> At that time, staff in secondary, primary and some early years settings (namely those attached to schools and state-maintained nurseries) were being tested twice weekly. DfE and DHSC proposed testing all secondary and FE pupils on return to school and expanding twice-weekly testing to secondary pupils, staff at private early years settings and in the children's social care system. The proposals were agreed<sup>472</sup> and, among other actions, DfE was commissioned to work with the CTF on communicating the plans for testing in education settings and to ensure they were included in the roadmap.<sup>473</sup> CDL updated the Prime Minister by way of his weekly update.<sup>474</sup>
- 8.35. The Education Gold meeting on 18 February 2021 considered the weekly SitRep<sup>475</sup> and a slide pack from DfE on reopening education.<sup>476</sup> The latter outlined the next steps as part of the reopening of education settings which included the publishing of the broader Roadmap on 22 February 2021, and the issuing of the Contingency Framework and Guidance on the same day. The next steps covered the communications and reporting which would support reopening.<sup>477</sup> There were also updates on:
- 8.35.1. Wraparound childcare: "As part of reopening education settings, each of our proposed approaches has included wraparound childcare / out-of-school settings opening in line with schools (both on and off school sites)". Agreement was needed to amend the regulations to allow for this; and for restrictions on attendance to be moved into guidance. DfE were waiting on a view from the Health Secretary on this.
- 8.35.2. HE: There was a "Need to resolve the process and timeline for agreeing the return of the final group of HE students (52% of students). This needs to be in the context of wider roadmap discussions, so that education is not seen to be de-prioritised against other aspects of the economy, particularly given the significant impact on

<sup>470</sup> JF/521 - INQ000546621: Actions & Decisions, Education Gold 11.02.21

<sup>471</sup> JF/522 - INQ000092358: Brief, Covid-O 15.02.21

<sup>472</sup> JF/523 - INQ000507803: DfE and DHSC Testing Strategy for Education Settings, 12.02.21

<sup>473</sup> JF/524 - INQ000091747: Actions & Decisions, Covid-O 15.02.21

<sup>474</sup> JF/525 - INQ000226660: CDL Weekly Covid Operations Update 19.02.21

<sup>475</sup> JF/510 - INQ000546619: Covid Taskforce SitRep 18.02.21

<sup>476</sup> JF/526 - INQ000546620: Slides – Reopening Education 18.02.21

<sup>477</sup> JF/527 - INQ000546618: Actions and Decisions, Education Gold 18.02.21

student wellbeing/mental health, need for support for those graduating, and the disproportionate impact of online learning on the most disadvantaged. It would be difficult to defend opening pubs/restaurants and allowing holidays, but not allowing students to study in a campus environment which has excellent protocols (including testing) to make it safe”.

- 8.36. COVID-S on 21 February discussed the COVID-19 Spring 2021 Roadmap. The Prime Minister outlined that the vaccine rollout was operating successfully and the Roadmap, which was designed to be cautious but irreversible, comprised a series of steps five weeks apart. In this regard, the first step was for schools to open on 8 March 2021, accompanied by a testing regime. To reassure parents, students, and teachers, emphasis would be placed on the message that ‘schools were safe’. The Prime Minister acknowledged that the return of schools would increase circulation of the virus. The Education Secretary outlined the basis on which HE students were to return (see below).<sup>478</sup>
- 8.37. Following a discussion at Cabinet,<sup>479</sup> the Government published the COVID-19 Spring 2021 Roadmap on 22 February 2021.<sup>480</sup> It provided expressly for education at Step 1: that all children and students would return to face-to-face education in schools and further education (such as colleges) from 8 March 2021. Childcare and children’s supervised activities were also able to be resumed where they were necessary to enable parents to work or similar. This was to be supported by twice-weekly testing for secondary and college students, and regular testing for teachers. HE students at English institutions who needed to take part in practical teaching, access specialist facilities, or complete assessments were to return from 8 March 2021. The Spring 2021 Roadmap did not set out a date on which the remainder of HE students would return to face-to-face teaching, but the Government committed to reviewing the options by the end of the Easter holidays, and giving students and institutions a week’s notice ahead of reopening.
- 8.38. The roadmap also said that the Government recommended that the use of face coverings in HE, further education and secondary schools be extended for a limited period to all indoor environments - including classrooms - unless social distancing could be maintained. Face coverings were also recommended in early years and primary schools for staff and adult visitors in situations where social distancing between adults was not possible.

---

<sup>478</sup> JF/528 - INQ000088274: Minutes, Covid-S 21.02.21

<sup>479</sup> JF/529 - INQ000088893: Minutes, Cabinet 22.02.2021

<sup>480</sup> JF/530 - INQ000185087: Covid-19 Response Spring 2021, February 2021

- 8.39. The Education Gold meeting on 25 February 2021 considered the weekly SitRep<sup>481</sup> and a slide deck from DfE on reopening education<sup>482</sup>. Following the publication of the roadmap, the latter set out the next steps and support required across government, including continued support from the Cabinet Office on communications to help build parental confidence in returning children to face to face education, the monitoring of attendance, testing and transport, and details on risks and readiness to deliver.<sup>483</sup>
- 8.40. At the Education Gold meeting on 4 March 2021<sup>484</sup>, data and analysis in the SitRep showed that, generally, local authorities and trusts had reported a positive and willing approach to schools reopening - with 97% of local authorities indicating that all of their schools would open on 8 March 2021. The remainder was mostly due to testing capacity issues or a single school not being able to open because, for example, staff were isolating. Local authorities and trusts were confident that almost all schools would be ready to deliver mass testing for returning pupils during the first week. DfE was planning to follow up on 40 schools which were unsure as to their readiness. There was confidence that transport arrangements would be in place with only 8% of local authorities unsure about transport plans.<sup>485</sup> The actions included, among others, that DfE and the CTF would continue to work together on scoping the HE review, which had been trailed in the roadmap.<sup>486</sup>

Step one of the roadmap

- 8.41. At Cabinet on 9 March 2021, it was noted that 99% of schools had reopened and 96% of pupils were back in the classroom.<sup>487</sup> An Education Gold meeting on 11 March 2021 provided an early opportunity for a situation report on the reopening of schools, in respect for example of attendance and the workforce, data flows, and the response of stakeholders.<sup>488</sup> Early data showed the return was progressing positively.<sup>489</sup>
- 8.42. The main policy issue discussed at the meeting was draft terms of reference for a face coverings review. The existing policy was that pupils and staff in secondary school classrooms should wear face coverings where social distancing could not be maintained. It was explicitly intended as a time-limited measure up to Easter while the testing received in schools and FE settings bedded in. The review sought to confirm that the use of face

---

<sup>481</sup> JF/511 - INQ000541100: Covid Taskforce SitRep 22.02.21

<sup>482</sup> JF/531 - INQ000546616: Slides – Successfully Reopening Education 25.02.21

<sup>483</sup> JF/532 - INQ000546617: Actions & Decisions, Education Gold, 25.02.21

<sup>484</sup> JF/533 - INQ000546667: Agenda, Education Gold 04.03.2021

<sup>485</sup> JF/534 - INQ000546615: Covid Taskforce SitRep 04.03.21

<sup>486</sup> JF/535 - INQ000546666: Actions, Education Gold 04.03.21

<sup>487</sup> JF/536 - INQ000088975: Minutes, Cabinet 09.03.21

<sup>488</sup> JF/537 - INQ000546664: Agenda, Education Gold 11.03.21; JF/538 - INQ000546560: Actions and Minutes, Education Gold 11.03.21; JF/539 - INQ000546663: Actions and Decisions, Education Gold 11.03.21

<sup>489</sup> JF/540 - INQ000542688: Covid Taskforce SitRep 11.03.21

coverings in secondary school classrooms could be discontinued after the Easter holidays. Terms of reference were to be agreed by 12 March 2021 with the review involving DfE, PHE, TF and No.10 with supporting data provided by T&T and JBC.<sup>490</sup>

- 8.43. The Gold meeting also received an update on qualifications. DfE had confirmed its proposals in January 2021 that in summer 2021, students taking GCSE, AS and A levels regulated by Ofqual would be awarded grades based on an assessment by their teachers. Students were to receive grades based on what they were taught, and not what they missed. Ofqual and DfE had conducted a consultation on how to award grades fairly to provide clarity to the sector. Ofqual's technical consultation on the general qualifications alternative awarding framework was due to close that day, 11 March 2021. Further guidance from exam boards on assessing candidates was to be published by the end of March 2021.
- 8.44. Education Gold met on 18 March 2021.<sup>491</sup> It was reported that attendance at Early Years settings was 76% of the usual daily level. Attendance was high at both primary and secondary schools at 94% and 89% respectively (two days prior). 93% of state-funded secondary schools had been testing pupils. All FE sector settings had opened; 49% of students had returned to in-person learning with 74% able to return to in-person study.<sup>492</sup>
- 8.45. The key area for discussion was testing, supported by a DfE paper.<sup>493</sup> This explained that the number of tests in schools would drop as home testing took on a greater role (this discussion was a few weeks before the Government announced that everyone in England would be able to access free rapid tests, which could be used at home).<sup>494</sup>
- 8.46. Education Gold met again on 25 March 2021<sup>495</sup> and received a SitRep showing the data continued to move in the right direction.<sup>496</sup>

#### Step two of the roadmap

- 8.47. A COVID-O meeting, chaired by the Prime Minister, was convened on 5 April 2021 to receive a data briefing and to discuss Step 2 of the Roadmap, which was planned for no earlier than 12 April 2021. A paper prepared by the CTF recommended that the Committee agree to re-open non-essential retail, personal care, indoor leisure and outdoor hospitality as part of

---

<sup>490</sup> JF/541 - INQ000546665: Draft Terms of Reference - Face Coverings Review Education Gold 11.03.21

<sup>491</sup> JF/542 - INQ000546660: Agenda, Education Gold 18.03.21; JF/543 - INQ000546653: Actions and Decisions, Education Gold 18.03.21

<sup>492</sup> JF/544 - INQ000546659: Covid Taskforce SitRep 18.03.21

<sup>493</sup> JF/545 - INQ000546662: Paper - Covid Testing in Education Settings 18.03.21

<sup>494</sup> JF/546 - INQ000237346: DfE Statement - Twice weekly Rapid Testing to be Available to Everyone in England 05.04.21

<sup>495</sup> JF/547 - INQ000546651: Agenda, Education Gold 25.03.21

<sup>496</sup> JF/548 - INQ000542702: Covid Taskforce SitRep 25.03.21; JF/549 - INQ000546646: Actions, Education Gold 25.03.21

Step 2.<sup>497</sup> The CTF observed that testing data showed rising rates of infections in school age children, which was possibly explained in part by increased testing in schools. As part of the move to Step 2, the wearing of face coverings in classrooms and communal spaces would continue to be recommended for pupils in secondary schools and colleges. Under Equality Considerations, the paper recognised that relaxing restrictions risked increasing transmissions to families and CEV children. It was, however, noted that children and young people would benefit from all of the activities permitted by Step 2.

- 8.48. During the meeting, the CTF Director for Data and Analysis explained that the four tests which had been set for proceeding to Step 2 of the Roadmap had been met. Although prevalence had increased among school-age children and higher levels of infection were noted among their parents' age group, prevalence was very low and declining among older age groups which were at the greatest risk of hospitalisation.<sup>498</sup> The Committee agreed to proceed to Step 2 of the Roadmap on 12 April and to announce that asymptomatic testing would be made available to everyone in England from 9 April 2021.<sup>499</sup>
- 8.49. The SitRep provided for an Education Gold meeting on 8 April 2021 addressed the level of home testing<sup>500</sup> and a paper was provided on the causes of pupil absence and DfE's plans to maximise school attendance during the summer term.<sup>501</sup> DfE's data showed that the proportion of pupils who were absent from primary school was within the range of absences observed in previous spring terms, but was higher than historic averages in secondary and special schools. As part of planned measures to reduce the rate of pupil absences, DfE proposed implementing targeted interventions to reach the estimated 750,000 children who were persistently absent and to work with DHSC and DCMO to address the concerns of CEV pupils and parents about returning to school.<sup>502</sup>
- 8.50. In an Education SitRep circulated on 14 April 2021,<sup>503</sup> DfE reported that pupil attendance in Alternative Provision (AP) was an area of concern. Although the available evidence suggested that COVID-19 had not had a disproportionate impact on AP attendance, DfE officials were conducting a deep dive to better understand the drivers of absence.
- 8.51. An Education Gold meeting was held on 22 April 2021. The weekly SitRep provided the following summary points: (a) an estimated 76% of early years settings were open with attendance at 69% of the usual levels; (b) over 99% of schools were open and attendance

<sup>497</sup> JF/550 - INQ000091855: Paper - Covid-19 Response Step 2 of the Road Map (C-19 Taskforce) 05.04.21

<sup>498</sup> JF/551 - INQ000091856: Minutes, COVID-O 05.04.21

<sup>499</sup> JF/552 - INQ000054965: Actions and Decisions, COVID-O 05.04.21

<sup>500</sup> JF/553 - INQ000546649: Covid Taskforce SitRep 08.04.21

<sup>501</sup> JF/554 - INQ000546650: Paper - Planning for Post Easter Return 08.04.21

<sup>502</sup> JF/555 - INQ000546645: Actions and Decisions, Education Gold 08.04.21

<sup>503</sup> JF/556 - INQ000546643: Email 14.04.21; JF/557 - INQ000546644: Covid Taskforce SitRep 15.04.21

was at 93.3% overall with attendance higher in primary schools than secondary schools; (c) COVID-19 related absences had decreased after Easter; (d) school workforce absences had decreased since before Easter; (e) attendance rates for vulnerable children were at the highest level since the return of pupils on 8 March 2021; (f) on-site learning and rapid testing continued to progress smoothly in HE, 65-76% of students had returned to their term-time accommodation, and there was no evidence of any outbreaks and students COVID-19 cases remained low; and (g) 99.7% of school pupils and students were testing at home, and 98.7% of students at state-funded colleges were testing at home.<sup>504</sup>

8.52. The meeting was also provided with a slide deck on planning for the summer term, the key themes of which were: (i) maximising attendance and confidence in the safety across educational settings; (ii) maintaining adherence to the enhanced safety measures that formed the system of controls and maximising take up of testing; (iii) reviewing the system of controls in parallel with wider government reviews of NPIs and planning for any de-escalating of them in line with the roadmap; (iv) ensuring readiness to act in the event of any resurgences of the virus and any need for further restrictions; (v) managing the qualifications process for the upcoming summer; (vi) preparing for the safe return of remaining HE students; and (vii) addressing attainment gaps/mental health impacts. The slide deck also outlined the development of a long-term strategic plan for the next academic year and beyond.<sup>505</sup>

8.53. The Education Secretary had agreed, in line with PHE advice, that the recommendation to wear face coverings in classrooms by staff and students and the recommendation for students to wear face coverings in communal areas would remain in place until Step 3 of the roadmap (17 May 2021) at the earliest. DfE had started to set out the process for determining the policy for that point onwards, and this was picked up in the actions from the Education Gold meeting.<sup>506</sup>

#### *The higher education review*

8.54. HE students on practical courses had returned to face-to-face education on 8 March 2021, at Step 1 of the roadmap. From early March 2021, DfE led an internal review of the options as to when the remaining students could return, with inputs from the Cabinet Office, JBC and HMT, among others. The review's objectives were to explore the options for the return to face-to-face teaching and learning taking into account the data, considering the implications of the options, and proposing mitigations. While the review was led by DfE, it was overseen

<sup>504</sup> JF/558 - INQ000546552: Covid Taskforce SitRep 22.04.21

<sup>505</sup> JF/559 - INQ000546642: GOLD Slides - Longer Term Planning 22.04.21

<sup>506</sup> JF/560 - INQ000546637: Actions, Education Gold 22.04.21

by a cross-government group, the HE Review Steering Group, which was convened, coordinated and chaired by the CTF. The role of the HE Review Steering Group was to oversee progress and convene inputs from across government, with a standing membership of Directors General and Directors from DfE, DHSC, HMT, MCLD, CDMO, PHE, JBC, NHST&T, and GoScience. As set out in the Group's Terms of Reference, the principal options as to the return date were either at Step 3 (17 May) or at Step 4 (21 June), noting the government's commitment in the roadmap to announcing a decision by the end of the Easter holidays.<sup>507</sup>

8.55. The HE Review Steering Group met on five occasions on 19 March 2021<sup>508</sup>, 24 March 2021<sup>509</sup>, 29 March 2021<sup>510</sup>, 31 March 2021<sup>511</sup> and 7 April 2021.<sup>512</sup> Advice from DfE set out the risks - such as increased transmission from face-to-face teaching and student accommodation - balanced against the possible trade-offs, which were public health concerns, equity across the nations, student wellbeing and student contributions to local economies. DfE set out the options of returning at Step 2, 3 or 4, with a recommendation for Step 2 (no earlier than 12 April 2021), and provided data on cases and testing following the initial return of some students. A workplan was set out.<sup>513</sup> At the following meetings, a range of data and analysis fed into the group for consideration, for example from HMT, GoScience, SAGE and DfE.<sup>514</sup>

8.56. In advice to the Prime Minister on 24 March 2021, the CTF recommended that students return at Step 3, i.e. no earlier than 17 May 2021.<sup>515</sup> The advice noted this option balanced the educational benefits for students with the need to reduce public health risk and protect the further openings planned in the Spring 2021 Roadmap. The advice noted that a full HE return at Step 2 had previously been discounted as an option by COVID-S<sup>516</sup>, and to review options for what was needed for a safe return at step 3 or 4, with the aim of announcing this in the week commencing 12 April 2021. The Prime Minister agreed this timeline and DfE announced on 13 April 2021 that HE would return in full from Step 3. On the same date, the Health Secretary wrote to the Prime Minister signalling his support, but flagging areas for

<sup>507</sup> JF/561 - INQ000546661: HE Terms of Reference

<sup>508</sup> JF/562 - INQ000546655: Invitation and Agenda, HE Review Steering Group Meeting 19.03.21; JF/563 - INQ000546657: Actions HE Review Steering Group Meeting 19.03.21

<sup>509</sup> JF/564 - INQ000546658: Slides - HE Review 24.03.21

<sup>510</sup> JF/565 - INQ000546654: Slides - HE Review 29.03.21

<sup>511</sup> JF/566 - INQ000546652: Slides - HE Review 31.03.21

<sup>512</sup> JF/567 - INQ000546647: Slides - HE Review 07.04.21; JF/568 - INQ000546648: Actions, HE Review Steering Group 07.04.21

<sup>513</sup> JF/569 - INQ000546656: Slides - HE Review 19.03.21

<sup>514</sup> JF/570 - INQ000546658: Email - HE Review Steering Group 23.03.21

<sup>515</sup> JF/571 - INQ000546813: Note - Higher Education Review 24.03.21

<sup>516</sup> JF/528 - INQ00088274: Minutes, Covid-S 21.02.21

further finalisation between DfE and DHSC to enable students' safe return, such as testing arrangements, outbreak plans, and the approach to social activity.<sup>517</sup>

Step three of the roadmap

- 8.57. On 28 April 2021 COVID-O was held to discuss and determine delivery readiness for Step 3 of the Roadmap, to inform subsequent decisions on whether to go forward with that step, which was due to be implemented no earlier than 17 May 2021. The Committee considered preparations in place to reopen HE settings for face-to-face teaching and non-practical courses. In this respect, the CTF paper highlighted, as an additional risk to the successful implementation of Step 3 of the Roadmap, the return of HE for non-practical courses without sufficient testing uptake, potentially leading to increased transmission and outbreaks in residential and social settings, as well as the surrounding community. The CTF's assessment was that following engagement with DfE, the CTF was confident that since the autumn of 2020 universities had improved their plans and developed new capabilities to reduce this risk.<sup>518</sup>
- 8.58. The paper also outlined lessons learned from the implementation of Steps 1 and 2. In respect of education, it was noted that feedback from schools and colleges focussed on the importance of guidance being available at the time of an announcement to enable parental confidence that measures had been carefully considered, and that children would be safe. In response to this feedback DfE planned to undertake further communications with the HE sector in advance of 17 May 2021 to remind them of the advice, guidance, and best practice toolkits available to them to help manage outbreaks and encourage testing. It was also noted that testing rates in HE settings were not as high as schools and colleges, and a strategy would need to be put in place to increase uptake amongst students and staff. COVID-O agreed there were sufficient plans in place to safely proceed with reopening on 17 May 2021, subject to the actions in the paper being implemented, and the decision being taken to go ahead with Step 3.<sup>519</sup>
- 8.59. An Education Gold meeting on 29 April 2021 considered the weekly SitRep<sup>520</sup> and a DfE slide deck on preparing for Step 3.<sup>521</sup> The latter outlined the changes to be implemented at Step 3, namely the removal of face coverings for students and staff, the return of remaining HE students, and the resuming of school domestic residential visits, and related outstanding

---

<sup>517</sup> JF/572 - INQ000257446: Letter from SSHSC to PM on Higher Education Return 13.04.21

<sup>518</sup> JF/573 - INQ000091892: Paper – Delivery Stocktake Step 3 of Spring 2021 Covid-19 Roadmap: An Overview 28.04.21

<sup>519</sup> JF/488 - INQ000092444: Actions, COVID-O 28.04.21

<sup>520</sup> JF/574 - INQ000541109: Covid Taskforce SitRep 29.04.21

<sup>521</sup> JF/575 - INQ000546638: GOLD Slides Step 3 and 4 Process and Issues 29.04.21

issues. Among several actions from the meeting, DfE was to look into potential actions to increase staff testing rates in high FSM and BAME population settings.<sup>522</sup>

- 8.60. Education Gold met again on 6 May 2021, informed by a SitRep.<sup>523</sup> It agreed a number of actions on testing, with the CTF asked to coordinate departments to schedule a further discussion on testing strategy and targeting of testing.<sup>524</sup>
- 8.61. COVID-O met on 10 May 2021<sup>525</sup> to discuss whether to go ahead with Step 3 of the Roadmap. The CTF provided two papers and recommended that the government should proceed at the earliest possible date of 17 May 2021. This included a recommendation that all students in HE could return to face-to-face education from this date. The committee agreed the recommendations in the papers,<sup>526</sup> and step 3 of the roadmap proceeded, with in person teaching returning in HE settings, and restrictions on face coverings in education settings eased.
- 8.62. Around this time, the Government was working to address the risks from variants of concern, and in particular the increased incidence of a new variant (B.1.617.2/Delta) which was especially marked in certain regions of the country. A Gold Local Action Committee meeting on 12 May 2021 assessed a SitRep from PHE<sup>527</sup> on the case rates across different regions. It discussed the possibility of reintroducing or continuing the use of face coverings in education settings in high-risk areas. Ministers agreed that, if used, this measure should be part of an overall strategy along with additional NPIs,<sup>528</sup> and asked DfE and JBC to develop a protocol for these measures.<sup>529</sup> The Prime Minister was kept updated on this work.<sup>530</sup>
- 8.63. Education Gold continued to meet throughout May 2021, looking ahead to policy changes in the pipeline in light of the increased risk from variants. For instance it set an action for the CTF on 20 May 2021<sup>531</sup> to arrange a further discussion with DfE on the planned move to Step 4 of the roadmap later in the summer. On 28 May 2021, Education Gold discussed this move, setting actions for PHE, NHST&T, DfE and the CTF to ensure different scenarios were planned for testing, vaccination and wider educational issues.<sup>532</sup>

---

<sup>522</sup> JF/576 - INQ000546635: Actions, Education Gold 29.04.21

<sup>523</sup> JF/577 - INQ000546636: Covid Taskforce SitRep 06.05.21

<sup>524</sup> JF/578 - INQ000546634: Actions, Education Gold 06.05.21

<sup>525</sup> JF/579 - INQ000092475: Draft Minutes, COVID-O 10.05.21

<sup>526</sup> JF/580 - INQ000092474: Actions and Decisions, COVID-O 10.05.21

<sup>527</sup> JF/581 - INQ000546602: SitRep - Coronavirus LAC Silver and Gold 10.05.21

<sup>528</sup> JF/582 - INQ000075573: Readout, Gold LAC 12.05.21

<sup>529</sup> JF/583 - INQ000119854: Actions, Gold LAC 12.05.21

<sup>530</sup> JF/584 - INQ000546727: Weekly Note to PM 16.05.21

<sup>531</sup> JF/585 - INQ000546641: Actions, Education Gold 20.05.21

<sup>532</sup> JF/586 - INQ000546640: Actions, Education Gold 28.05.21

- 8.64. On 3 June 2021, COVID-O met to discuss the Enhanced Response Package.<sup>533</sup> The package of measures, prepared by DHSC, aimed to support areas designated as “Enhanced Response Areas” (ERAs) due to the fast spread of the Delta variant of COVID-19. The Gold Local Action Committee had agreed that Directors of Public Health in 5 local authorities could make the decision to implement some NPIs including the wearing of face coverings, including in schools. COVID-O agreed to the package of measures, and to add two more local authorities to the list of ERAs. The committee also agreed that moving forward, an area being given ERA status should entail the assumption that Directors of Public Health in that area would gain the discretion to advise face coverings in education settings if they judged it necessary. Enhanced Response Areas continued to be monitored throughout the summer period, and a number of Education Gold meetings reviewed attendance data from Enhanced Response Areas<sup>534</sup> to monitor effectiveness of the additional measures. Local action was considered again by COVID-O on 15 July 2021<sup>535</sup>, where the committee agreed to a simplified package of local measures, including working with schools to support the standing up of onsite testing and reintroduction of face coverings where needed.
- 8.65. The Cabinet Office led the decision making process on whether to move to Step 4 of the Roadmap. This included the ending of classroom bubbles for primary and secondary schools, the removal of guidance to wear face-coverings in secondary schools, and the removal of restrictions on in-person teaching for HE settings.<sup>536</sup> Step 4 was due to take place no earlier than 21 June 2021, and COVID-O met on 13 June 2021<sup>537</sup> to discuss whether this date should be extended in light of the prevalence of the new Delta variant. The CTF provided a paper<sup>538</sup> which recommended a 4 week delay in moving to Step 4 until 19 July 2021 due to high case rates, partly driven by rising prevalence across the summer school term. The committee noted that this was a significant decision, and there was a need not to prolong regulations longer than needed, but that the delay in reopening would allow for 4 million additional vaccinations to be delivered, reducing the risk of further outbreaks significantly. Additionally, schools would close for summer holidays on 26 July 2021, which would dampen transmission until vaccination rates were higher. In light of this, COVID-O agreed that Step 4 should be delayed, and the CTF took forward work with DHSC to prepare regulations to enact this. The Cabinet was updated on 14 June 2021.<sup>539</sup>

---

<sup>533</sup> JF/587 - INQ000091951: Paper - Covid-19 Variants of Concern 03.06.21

<sup>534</sup> For instance JF/588 - INQ000546697 Covid Taskforce SitRep 08.07.21; JF/589 - INQ000542736: Covid Taskforce SitRep 15.07.21

<sup>535</sup> JF/590 - INQ000092224: Minutes, COVID-O 15.07.21

<sup>536</sup> JF/591 - INQ000546759: DfE Blog - Find Out What Step 4 of the Covid Roadmap Means for You 06.07.21

<sup>537</sup> JF/592 - INQ000146775: Minutes, COVID-O 13.06.21

<sup>538</sup> JF/593 - INQ000146807: Paper - COVID-O Data Pack 13.06.21

<sup>539</sup> JF/594 - INQ000089002: Minute, Cabinet, 14.06.21

- 8.66. Education Gold continued to meet regularly, with a focus on testing levels, sector guidance and the response to outbreaks. Education Gold meetings also considered how to address relevant policy questions on schools guidance, for instance on ventilation and testing over the summer break at the meeting on 24 June 2021.<sup>540</sup>
- 8.67. As case numbers in education settings continued to increase during the summer term, Education Gold monitored cases and isolation figures to help ensure the increase did not require policy interventions. The Education Gold meeting on 8 July 2021 asked DfE to bring together insights into the increase in testing at Asymptomatic Test Sites (ATS) and to feed this back to the CTF.<sup>541</sup> The issue of increased schools isolation was assessed again at the Education Gold meeting on 15 July 2021,<sup>542</sup> where it was noted that schools were remaining open prior to the upcoming summer break, albeit with much higher absence rates due to self-isolation. Following this meeting, DfE were asked to share a communications plan for schools and parents with the CTF and No.10, and the CTF was asked to agree a daily data plan for the following week with DfE,<sup>543</sup> to ensure that schools were supported to remain open until the beginning of the summer break in mid-to-late July 2021.
- 8.68. COVID-O met on 12 July 2021<sup>544</sup> and agreed that Step 4 would proceed on 19 July 2021. A paper by the CTF<sup>545</sup> outlined the risks associated with this, including the risk that a large number of young people would be infected or required to isolate due to low vaccination rates in that cohort. To mitigate this, the committee agreed a public campaign to encourage vaccination among young adults.<sup>546</sup> On 19 July 2021, the UK moved to Step 4<sup>547</sup> and restrictions on education settings were relaxed in line with the agreed plan.

### Certification

- 8.69. COVID-O met on 6 May 2021<sup>548</sup> to discuss testing in relation to the proposed domestic certification system. The committee discussed what approach should be taken to the certification of children, and agreed some children should be exempted from the certification system,<sup>549</sup> though the exact age below which the exemption would apply had not yet been decided. COVID-O returned to this issue on 20 May 2021<sup>550</sup> and agreed that a decision on

<sup>540</sup> JF/595 - INQ000546694: Slidepack - DfE Step 4 Sector Guidance, for Education Gold 24.06.21

<sup>541</sup> JF/596 - INQ000546695: Actions and Decisions, Education Gold, 08.07.21

<sup>542</sup> JF/589 - INQ000542736: Covid Taskforce SitRep 15.07.21

<sup>543</sup> JF/597 - INQ000546693: Actions, Education Gold 15.07.21

<sup>544</sup> JF/598 - INQ000092214: Minutes, COVID-O 12.07.21

<sup>545</sup> JF/599 - INQ000055220: Annex A - COVID 19 Data Brief and the Four Tests 12.07.21

<sup>546</sup> JF/600 - INQ000092034: Actions, Covid-O, 12.07.21

<sup>547</sup> JF/601 - INQ000136725: Publication - Moving to Step 4 of the Roadmap July 2021

<sup>548</sup> JF/602 - INQ000092099: Minutes, COVID-O 06.05.21

<sup>549</sup> JF/603 - INQ000092462: Actions, COVID-O 06.05.21

<sup>550</sup> JF/604 - INQ000091937 Minutes, COVID-O 20.05.21; JF/605 - INQ000092490: Actions, COVID-O 20.05.21

the age below which the exemption would apply should be made following further advice expected from DHSC.

Step four of the roadmap

- 8.70. In July and August 2021, COVID-O focussed on vaccination, testing and preparing for the return of children and young people to education settings in the autumn term. The committee met on 19 July 2021 to discuss JCVI advice on the vaccination of children, noting that the existing approach had been maintained for 16-17 year-olds, and that 12-15 year-olds who were household contacts of those who were immunosuppressed would now receive an offer of vaccination.<sup>551</sup> The committee agreed that the JCVI advice should not be departed from, but that the JCVI should continue to review this advice, with the potential for future rapid rollout to those aged 12-17. COVID-O returned to this issue on 27 July 2021.<sup>552</sup> DHSC had asked the JCVI further questions on this issue and was awaiting a response. The committee noted that international comparators had now approved the COVID-19 vaccine for use in children, and that the UK needed to be ready to act quickly to make best use of the summer period to vaccinate younger age groups should the JCVI advice change. The committee agreed that DHSC would lead work to develop an operational plan for vaccine rollout to children, and that the Prime Minister should be kept updated.<sup>553</sup>
- 8.71. Also at COVID-O on 27 July 2021, DfE were asked to update the CTF on progress for the safe return of schools, universities and colleges in the autumn. In preparation for that event, COVID-O met to assess key risks, for instance on 22 July 2021.<sup>554</sup> COVID-O also met on 26 July 2021<sup>555</sup> to plan the provision of daily contact testing (DCT) in schools upon return. COVID-O had agreed on 1 July 2021 that some groups, including children, could replace self-isolation with DCT if identified as a contact of a positive case, and Cabinet Office provided a paper for the 26 July 2021 meeting with recommendations for operationalising this change.<sup>556</sup> The paper noted that pilots had shown DCT in schools to be effective at reducing transmission, and the committee agreed to the allocation of testing sites recommended in the paper.<sup>557</sup>
- 8.72. On 4 August 2021, JCVI published new advice<sup>558</sup> recommending that those aged 16-17 should be offered a first dose of the Pfizer vaccine. Following this change, the Government

---

<sup>551</sup> JF/606 - INQ000092173: Minutes, COVID-O 19.07.21

<sup>552</sup> JF/607 - INQ000092226: Minutes, COVID-O 27.07.21

<sup>553</sup> JF/608 - INQ000092081: Actions, COVID-O 27.07.21

<sup>554</sup> For instance JF/609 - INQ000092219: Minutes, COVID-O 22.07.21

<sup>555</sup> JF/610 - INQ000092093: Minute - Covid-O 26 July 2021

<sup>556</sup> JF/611 - INQ000092074: Paper - Expanding Daily Contact Testing 26.07.21

<sup>557</sup> JF/612 - INQ000092076: Actions and Decisions, Covid-O 26.07.21

<sup>558</sup> JF/613 - INQ000235154: Publication - JCVI Statement on COVID-19 Vaccination of Children and Young People Aged 12 to 17 years 04.08.21

began working to offer a first dose of the vaccine to all children aged 16-17, and all young people aged 18-25. On 15 August 2021, the Government announced that everyone aged 16-17 would be offered a first dose of the vaccine by 23 August 2021.<sup>559</sup> Following a Dashboard meeting on 23 August 2021, No.10 asked the NHS to develop further options for increasing uptake of the vaccine among 16-17-year-olds and university students, noting the need to maximise vaccination ahead of the new academic term.<sup>560</sup>

- 8.73. On 2 September 2021, the JCVI provided the Government with further advice on the vaccination of children aged 12-15 years.<sup>561</sup> This advice recognised that the benefits from vaccination were marginally greater than the potential known harms, but acknowledged considerable uncertainty regarding the magnitude of the potential harms. The JCVI noted that the Government may wish to seek further views on the wider societal and educational impacts from the CMOs. The Government accepted and followed this advice.<sup>562</sup> An update on the vaccination of each age group, alongside an overview of testing in schools and colleges, was considered at an Education Gold meeting on 2 September 2021.<sup>563</sup>
- 8.74. Education Gold met again on 9 September 2021 to discuss the return of HE. It discussed vaccination of young people in FE settings, and agreed action was needed to drive vaccine uptake in this group. The CTF was asked to convene a meeting with DfE, DHSC and NHSE on interventions to achieve this, and was also asked to coordinate and support the resolution of any remaining policy issues to be agreed with DfE in preparation for the return of HE.
- 8.75. The CMO responded to the Government's request for advice on behalf of the four CMOs of the UK on 13 September 2021. The CMOs' advice was to extend the offer of vaccination to all children aged 12-15 given the 'additional likely benefits of reducing educational disruption, and the consequent reduction in public health harm from educational disruption'.<sup>564</sup> Ministers formally agreed to follow the advice provided by the CMOs on vaccinating children aged 12-15 at a COVID-O meeting chaired by CDL on 13 September 2021.<sup>565</sup>

### Long COVID

---

<sup>559</sup> JF/614 - INQ000546778 : DHSC Statement - All Young People Aged 16 and 17 in England to be Offered Vaccine by Next Week 15.08.21

<sup>560</sup> JF/615 - INQ000217342: Actions, PM Meeting on Vaccine Deployment 28.08.21

<sup>561</sup> JF/616 - INQ000203918: Statement by the JCVI on Covid Vaccination of Children Aged 12-15 years 02.09.21

<sup>562</sup> JF/617 - INQ000203917: Letter from CMO to Cabinet on Covid Vaccination of Children and Young People Aged 12-15 13.09.21

<sup>563</sup> JF/618 - INQ000546691 Covid Taskforce SitRep 02.09.21; JF/619 - INQ000546692: Actions, Education Gold 02.09.21

<sup>564</sup> JF/617 - INQ000203917: Letter from CMO to Cabinet on Covid Vaccination of Children and Young People aged 12-15 13.09.21

<sup>565</sup> JF/620 - INQ000092120: Minutes, COVID-O 13.09.21; JF/621 - INQ000064128: Actions and Decisions Covid-O 13.09.21

- 8.76. On 9 July 2021, the CTF provided the Prime Minister with a briefing outlining what were understood to be the main risks in respect of Long Covid. While the data suggested that those aged between 35-69 were most vulnerable, the CTF was concerned that “the bulk of Long COVID cases in the coming months may come from younger, unvaccinated individuals.” £50m of Government funding had been provided for research into the causes of Long COVID, including the UCL-led Long COVID in Children and Young People (CLoCk) study. The CTF committed to monitoring case rates and hospitalisations in the young over the following 6 weeks, with the intention of commissioning JCVI advice specifically on Long COVID in children if it became necessary to do so.<sup>566</sup>
- 8.77. In preparation for managing the virus over the Autumn and Winter period, the CTF reviewed the data and analysis programme. This included a commission to DHSC, PHE and DfE on 17 August 2021 where DfE were asked to look into the impacts of Long COVID on education, teaching and learning.<sup>567</sup>
- 8.78. The resulting cross-government Evidence Summary was provided to the CTF on 1 September 2021.<sup>568</sup> Based on the available studies, it concluded that prolonged COVID-19 symptoms in children were infrequent and less likely to occur in children than adults - the report did, however, acknowledge the lack of data on children and Long COVID. It also reported the view amongst some clinicians that the ONS figures overstated the prevalence of Long COVID in children, as the symptoms (such as headache and fatigue) were also very common in children and young people who had not had COVID-19. There was insufficient evidence, at that stage, to quantify the impact of vaccination on the development of Long COVID in either adults or children.
- 8.79. While the report predominantly focused on the health impacts of Long COVID, it raised concerns over the short and long-term effects on school performance and learning. Kings College London noted that any persistent illness could have adverse mental health outcomes and affect school attendance - and that persistent symptoms from any illness could be associated with low mood, school refusal and separation anxiety. The report suggested that further studies were required to understand the impact that Long COVID may have on school performance and learning.
- 8.80. The JCVI report of 4 August 2021<sup>569</sup>, which supported decision-making in early September on the vaccination programme in children and young people, also referenced the existing

---

<sup>566</sup> JF/622 - INQ000622771: PM Briefing - Long COVID: risks to the population and the Health Service 09.07.21

<sup>567</sup> JF/623 - INQ000622776: Email commission: September Review Data and Analysis Programme 17.08.21

<sup>568</sup> JF/624 - INQ000622769: Long COVID - Evidence Summary V2 - September 2021 01.09.21

<sup>569</sup> JF/613 - INQ000235154: Publication - JCVI Statement on COVID-19 Vaccination of Children and Young People Aged 12 to 17 years 04.08.21 (exhibited at FN558)

studies on children and Long COVID. It noted that as “vaccination protects against COVID-19, it is expected that vaccination will also provide some protection against the development of post-COVID-19 syndrome, although estimates of vaccine effectiveness are not available.” The report recognised the mental health and educational impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people, and that school-based isolation measures had a disproportionate impact on education, and may also have affected mental health. It concluded that “the extent to which vaccination may mitigate the mental health and educational impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people is difficult to quantify.”

- 8.81. The second Spotlight report of 2 March 2022 on Long COVID flagged the lack of scientific consensus on the definition as hampering efforts to firmly estimate prevalence. An iteration of the UCL’s CLoCk study, published on 7 February 2022, found that “53.3% of the children and young people included who tested negative presented with symptoms associated with [Long COVID] three months after testing (compared to 66.5% of those who tested positive). However, those with prior infection reported higher prevalence of multiple symptoms (30.3% with prior infection and 16.2% of controls).” Other longer term health impacts had also emerged over time, with COVID-19 infection being associated with increased likelihood of new diabetes diagnoses in under-18 year olds, and an increased risk of mental health disorders.<sup>570</sup>

#### Autumn and winter planning

- 8.82. The COVID-O meeting on 13 September 2021<sup>571</sup> also discussed the autumn response, including a paper by the CTF which set out proposed ‘Plan A’ and ‘Plan B’ measures for the upcoming period, in light of the prevailing uncertainty about variants of concern and how the colder months would play out as compared to the previous year when many more restrictions - and fewer vaccinations - had been in place.
- 8.83. ‘Plan A’ was a set of interventions including vaccinations, Test, Trace & Isolate efforts and public guidance on behaviours. ‘Plan B’ was a set of contingency measures in the event that Plan A was not sufficient. Neither plan included school closures, but ‘Plan B’ included an option to once again legally mandate face coverings in certain settings, with the Government to decide at the time which settings would be included. Additionally, Plan B was to work in conjunction with the existing contingency framework for schools, should further contingency measures be required. The committee agreed to the measures, and an overview of these plans was published as part of the Government’s ‘COVID-19 Response: Autumn and Winter Plan 2021’.

---

<sup>570</sup> JF/625 - INQ000622770: Spotlight Report - Long COVID 02.03.22

<sup>571</sup> JF/620 - INQ000092120: Minutes, COVID-O 13.09.21

- 8.84. Education Gold continued to meet regularly throughout September and October 2021 as the return of education to physical settings continued across all sectors. On 16 September 2021, it was provided with a SitRep<sup>572</sup> and an update on the roll-out of (the previously announced provision of) CO<sub>2</sub> monitors in classrooms<sup>573</sup>. The meeting noted the rapid roll-out of the monitors and the progress of efforts to provide air cleaning devices for education settings. On 23 September 2021, the Gold meeting discussed PHE's outbreak control measures<sup>574</sup> and once again assessed readiness for the return of HE.<sup>575</sup> Education Gold returned to outbreak management on 7 October 2021<sup>576</sup> and 21 October 2021<sup>577</sup>, covering proposals to support testing and vaccination of children and young people, and the decision to give Directors of Public Health flexibility to advise face coverings in communal spaces in certain circumstances. At a further Education Gold on 28 October 2021,<sup>578</sup> DfE provided updates on the ongoing progress of the above issues, including ventilation in classrooms; increasing testing uptake, and outbreak management. Following on from this, these issues remained a priority, both at further meetings,<sup>579</sup> and at the working level, with updates shared via email on progress.<sup>580</sup>
- 8.85. Education Gold met again on 25 November 2021<sup>581</sup> to discuss vaccine uptake in children. The committee noted that uptake had slowed across half term, and that a change in advice on wait times for vaccination may have contributed to this. The committee also discussed steps taken to ensure children were still able to take up the offer of vaccination where possible.

*Recovery of education and children's social care services*

- 8.86. On 27 January 2021, in his statement at the COVID-19 press conference, the Prime Minister said, "to help parents and teachers with this extended period of remote learning[,] We will extend the arrangements for providing free school meals for those eligible children not in school[,] including food parcels and the national voucher scheme – until those pupils have returned to the classroom. And as we did this financial year, we will provide a catch-up programme over the next financial year, with a further £300 million of new money to schools for tutoring, and we will work with the education sector to develop, wherever appropriate,

<sup>572</sup> JF/626 - INQ000546689: Covid Taskforce SitRep 13.09.21

<sup>573</sup> JF/627 - INQ000546690: Slides on Ventilation 13.09.21

<sup>574</sup> JF/628 - INQ000546685: Slides on Outbreak Management 23.09.21

<sup>575</sup> JF/629 - INQ000546686: Slides on HE Readiness 23.09.21

<sup>576</sup> JF/630 - INQ000546688: Slides on Outbreak Management 07.10.21

<sup>577</sup> JF/631 - INQ000546687: Slides on Outbreak Management 21.10.21

<sup>578</sup> JF/632 - INQ000546559: Agenda, Education Gold 28.10.21

<sup>579</sup> For instance: JF/633 - INQ000546683 Covid Taskforce SitRep 08.11.21; JF/634 - INQ000546682: Covid Taskforce SitRep 15.11.21

<sup>580</sup> For instance: JF/635 - INQ000546684: Email - No.10 / DfE / UKHSA Schools Testing Plan 02.11.21

<sup>581</sup> JF/636 - INQ000546562: Readout, Education Gold, 25.11.21

specific initiatives for summer schools[,] as well as a Covid Premium for catch-up and to support pupils to catch up[.] We will work with parents, teachers and schools to develop a long-term plan[,] to make sure all pupils have the chance to make up their learning over the course of this Parliament, so we tackle that issue of differential learning and kids who may have fallen behind through no fault of their own”.<sup>582</sup>

- 8.87. On 1 February 2021, the No.10 Policy Unit prepared advice to the Prime Minister recommending the appointment of Sir Kevan Collins as Education Recovery Commissioner to design, support and ensure implementation of the education catch-up plan.<sup>583</sup> The No.10 Policy Unit proposed that ‘the Education Recovery Commissioner [be] the public face of the catch-up plan, jointly owning the plan with the Education Secretary. The Education Recovery Commissioner would report directly to [the Prime Minister] (via NERT) and would be supported by a Catch-Up Taskforce, including engaged and supportive backbenchers’.
- 8.88. The advice highlighted that school closures the previous summer had resulted in the equivalent of 3 months of lost learning for pupils, with disadvantaged pupils having suffered far more. With further school closures in early 2021 expected to widen the attainment gap even further, catching up on lost learning would be an educational priority for the Government. The remit of the Commissioner would be to focus on refining and delivering the catch-up plan, which would consist of two parts: first, increasing time in school by extending the school day; and second, delivering the school reform plan to improve the quality of teaching and programmes.
- 8.89. This advice noted that the existing school reform plan was on track. Work on education recovery had begun in June 2020, with a ‘catch-up’ package worth £1 billion previously made available to schools to fund additional learning and support, including tutoring for children most in need, and disadvantaged children (see paragraph 5.44) Since then, the National Tutoring Programme had recruited over 13,000 tutors supporting more than 100,000 children. The paper also outlined some of the challenges in implementing the plan such as anticipated opposition from Teaching Unions in relation to the extension of the school day. The paper also explained that CDL was leading a NERT sub-committee on Public Services which, together with the Catch-Up Taskforce, would provide a challenge function to the Commissioner and Education Secretary. The paper noted that the NERT sub-committee was also addressing backlogs in children’s social care and ensuring those most vulnerable children were fully re-engaged with the education and care systems.

---

<sup>582</sup> JF/637 - INQ000542877: Prime Minister’s Statement on Coronavirus 27.01.21

<sup>583</sup> JF/638 - INQ000546725: Note to PM - Education Recovery Commissioner 31.01.21

- 8.90. The work of the Education Recovery Commissioner superseded the ‘expert group’ previously announced by the Education Secretary on 3 December 2020.
- 8.91. The NERT committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, met on 2 February 2021 and carried out an initial prioritisation of public services backlogs, based on a paper prepared by Cabinet Office officials.<sup>584</sup> The committee agreed that the first phase of NERT(PS), from February to March 2021, would focus on lost learning, criminal court backlogs and elective waiting lists. The second phase, from March 2021, was to include services for vulnerable children. NERT(PS) was to meet at least weekly, with the option of increasing the regularity of meetings to maintain pace and deliver as needed. In an update to the Prime Minister, CDL explained that once the sub-committee had reached a shared understanding of the challenges faced, it would move swiftly to securing recovery and reform. It would report to NERT at regular intervals on performance across public services, the progress made to date and areas for further intervention.<sup>585</sup> CDL followed-up on 5 March 2021 in a note to the Prime Minister, outlining that NERT(PS) would review the scale and nature of lost learning at its next meeting on 8 March 2021. At that meeting, DfE were expected to provide detailed policy options to address the issues.<sup>586</sup>
- 8.92. On 24 February 2021, DfE announced a new education recovery package for children and young people in England.<sup>587</sup> It included:
- 8.92.1. A new one-off £302 million Recovery Premium for state primary and secondary schools, building on the Pupil Premium, to further support pupils who needed it most.
  - 8.92.2. £200 million (from the £300 million announced by the Prime Minister in January to expand the tutoring programmes). This was to fund an £83 million expansion of the National Tutoring Programme for primary and secondary schools, which had been shown to boost catch up learning by as much as 3-5 months at a time; a £102 million extension of the 16-19 Tuition Fund for a further year to support more students in English, maths and other vocational and academic subjects; and £18 million funding to support language development in the early years – £10m to be allocated to a pre-reception early language programme and £8m for Nuffield Foundation to deliver the Nuffield Early Language Intervention for reception children.

---

<sup>584</sup> JF/639 - INQ000546678: NERT Paper on Public Services Recovery Including Prioritisation 02.02.21

<sup>585</sup> JF/640 - INQ000546677: CDL Paper to PM on Public Services Recovery 26.02.2021 (the meeting date of the NERT(PS) in this paper is incorrect)

<sup>586</sup> JF/641 - INQ000546675: CDL to PM Delivery Note 05.03.21

<sup>587</sup> JF/642 - INQ000541082: DfE Statement - New Education Recovery Package for Children and Young People 25.02.21

- 8.92.3. £200 million (including the final £100 million from the Prime Minister's announcement) would be available to secondary schools to deliver face-to-face summer schools. This was alongside wider support funded through the Holiday Activities and Food Programme across the country.
- 8.92.4. A range of high-quality online resources was to be available for all teachers and pupils, starting from the summer term and throughout summer holidays. These were to be provided by Oak National Academy.
- 8.93. The announcement explained that Sir Kevan Collins was to lead the way on longer-term engagement work with teachers, school and college leaders, educational charities and families to review how evidence-based interventions could be used to address the impact of the pandemic on learning. On 3 March 2021, CDL met with Kevan Collins, Education Commissioner to discuss how the NERT(PS) could support in developing and scrutinising the detail of policy interventions for education recovery.
- 8.94. NERT (PS) met on 8 March 2021 to review the scale and nature of lost learning.<sup>588</sup> DfE provided a paper on education recovery<sup>589</sup> and the head of the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit (PMIU) presented data on lost learning.<sup>590</sup> PMIU had developed a data dashboard to provide an independent overview of the scale of lost learning, noting that it was challenging to both estimate and address lost learning. Data suggested that the average pupil had lost a total of 110 days of in-person schooling, with the worst affected having missed up to 185 days, and that pupils were, on average, 3 months behind in reading and nearly 5 months behind in maths. It also showed lost learning was unequal across the country, with pupils in the North East and Yorkshire having experienced more learning loss than the national average for both secondary and primary. Disadvantaged children and those that spoke English as an additional language had also experienced greater learning loss. The committee agreed to have further decision-making meetings in the following weeks, and DfE was asked to develop detailed policy options for consideration,<sup>591</sup> as well as improving their measurement of the problem.<sup>592</sup>
- 8.95. The committee noted that this should be seen as an opportunity to align work on lost learning with wider schools reform, but that additional specific work would be needed on education recovery. DfE proposed a timeline to implement interventions: Phase 1 reforms were to be finalised between April and May for implementation in September 2021 and work on phase 2

---

<sup>588</sup> JF/643 - INQ000528258: Brief, NERT(PS) 08.03.21, JF/017 - INQ000528261: Minutes, NERT(PS) 08.03.21

<sup>589</sup> JF/644 - INQ000528259: Paper - Education Recovery (lost learning) NERT(PS) 08.03.21

<sup>590</sup> JF/645 - INQ000528260: Slidepack, NERT(PS) 08.03.21

<sup>591</sup> JF/646 - INQ000546839: Actions, NERT (PS) 10.03.21

<sup>592</sup> JF/647 - INQ000546676: CDL Note to PM - Public Services Recovery Update 11.03.21

would be agreed at the Spending Review, with work to prepare for this planned between February and September 2021.

- 8.96. During March 2021, the Education Recovery Commissioner established the Education Recovery Advisory Committee, which held its first meeting on 24 March 2021.<sup>593</sup> The purpose of the committee was to provide support and advice to the Education Recovery Commissioner to ensure the approach to education recovery had the greatest possible impact.<sup>594</sup>
- 8.97. A meeting of NERT(PS) took place on 25 March 2021 to consider the package of policy interventions to address lost learning and to agree on a set of metrics to monitor progress and define success.<sup>595</sup> The Prime Minister was looking to announce a set of initiatives by May 2021 with a view to recovering all lost learning by 2024. Initiatives were laid out for early years, schools and FE (16-19 year olds).<sup>596</sup>
- 8.98. It was agreed that DfE, working with Ofsted, the Education Recovery Commissioner and No.10 would return to the NERT(PS) in the week commencing 12 April 2021 with an evaluation of each proposed policy intervention against the expected impact on recovery, speed of implementation and timescale for the impact, delivery method, risks and viability, public favourability and value for money. They would plan for the regular collection of data to establish a clear baseline for lost learning to enable the setting of a trajectory against which progress could be tracked. They would deliver a proposed metric for assessing wellbeing and a delivery plan to implement the proposed packages of measures. DfE would also work with Ofsted on options for an enhanced and increased inspection regime in supporting the implementation of and tracking of the proposed initiatives. There was also to be reporting on cost neutral options, allocation of additional funding, and the expected impact of taking no additional action.<sup>597</sup>
- 8.99. The Prime Minister met with the Education Secretary and the Education Recovery Commissioner on 31 March 2021 to discuss the future proposals for education recovery for ages 2-19 across all education settings.<sup>598</sup> The meeting was used to discuss the objectives, timelines and resourcing for education recovery as well as the metrics for measuring

---

<sup>593</sup> JF/648 - INQ000622780: Email from ERC to the Committee 24.03.21; JF/649 - INQ000622778: Email containing papers for Committee meeting 22.03.21; JF/650 - INQ000622779: Agenda – Advisory Committee 24.03.21

<sup>594</sup> JF/649 - INQ000622778: Terms of Reference 22.03.21

<sup>595</sup> JF/651 - INQ000528264: Agenda NERT(PS) 25.03.21; JF/652 - INQ000528265: Brief, NERT(PS) 25.03.21

<sup>596</sup> JF/653 - INQ000528262: Slides - Education Recovery Plan NERT(PS) 25.03.21; JF/654 - INQ000528263: Slides - Education Recovery Plan NERT(PS) 25.03.21

<sup>597</sup> JF/018 - INQ000528266: Actions, NERT(PS) 25.03.21

<sup>598</sup> JF/655 - INQ000546738: DfE Slides - PM Update on the Education Recovery Plan 31.03.21

progress. Further work was commissioned to determine the policy detail and funding package with HMT, in advance of an announcement planned for May 2021.<sup>599</sup>

- 8.100. A NERT(PS) meeting, chaired by CDL, was convened on 15 April 2021 to discuss education recovery.<sup>600</sup> In a briefing prepared for CDL, the objectives of the meeting were summarised as follows: (i) to agree data collection plans to support the establishment of a robust baseline for lost learning; (ii) to agree best metrics to monitor and track progress against targets; and (iii) to agree Ofsted's role in delivering the education recovery package and holding schools accountable.<sup>601</sup> The briefing observed that further work was required to ensure that the baseline reflected the different needs and vulnerabilities of children to enable both learning loss and the attainment gap to be measured. DfE also needed to clarify how it intended to use the data collected to measure pupil progress regularly and to target children most at risk.
- 8.101. A paper produced by DfE for the meeting outlined a plan to deliver three outcomes by the end of the academic year 2023/2024: (i) to ensure that all children and young people recovered learning loss due to the pandemic; (ii) to narrow the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers; and (iii) to enable pupils to enjoy a broader educational experience. DfE proposed to use statutory, commercial and other assessments to develop a baseline against which to measure learning recovery. Under its proposals, every school and college would be required to devise its own plan for education recovery, the implementation of which would be reviewed by Ofsted which would conduct additional recovery inspections.<sup>602</sup>
- 8.102. By way of actions arising from the meeting, DfE was tasked to produce a more detailed lost learning recovery plan by 22 April 2021 and to work with Ofsted to: (a) develop an appropriate inspection framework for assessing education recovery plans across different school settings; (b) provide a timeline for implementation of recovery inspections by the end of academic year 2023/204, including the level of resource available and how this could be scaled up to meet the Government's ambition; and (c) review first inspection samples early on to identify emerging best practice and develop plans for dissemination, including through public guidance.<sup>603</sup>
- 8.103. By way of follow-up, a NERT(PS) meeting held on 26 April 2021 again focused on lost learning and the metrics and outcomes that would be required to assess the impact of the relevant policies. The committee also scrutinised DfE's proposed Education Recovery Plan

---

<sup>599</sup> JF/656 - INQ000546737: Email Readout 31.03.21

<sup>600</sup> JF/657 - INQ000528268: Agenda, NERT(PS) 15.04.21

<sup>601</sup> JF/658 - INQ000528267: Briefing, NERT(PS) 15.04.21

<sup>602</sup> JF/659 - INQ000528269: NERT(PS) Education Recovery Slide Pack 15.04.21

<sup>603</sup> JF/019 - INQ000528270: Actions, NERT(PS) 15.04.21

in anticipation of the next NERT(PS) which would be held on 28 April 2021 and chaired by the Prime Minister.<sup>604</sup> Funding for the recovery package was being considered separately through trilateral discussions between HMT, No.10 and DfE, and was ultimately expected to be agreed between the Prime Minister, Chancellor and Education Secretary.<sup>605</sup> NERT(PS) recommended that further assessment of the cost/benefit of interventions, the deliverability (including the likelihood and impact of key risks and whether the proposed mitigations were sufficient, including for workforce capacity), and scalability of the options be carried out before announcing an education recovery package.<sup>606</sup>

8.104. In its presentation, DfE informed the committee that the average pupil had missed 115 days of school and was 4-6 months behind in their education.<sup>607</sup> The aim of the plan was to recover learning loss at all ages, build a stronger and fairer system, narrow the attainment gap and improve the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people. The plan focused on three pillars, referred to as the three Ts: i) Time: more time in education to make up for time spent out of education settings, ii) Teaching: improving the quality of teaching, iii) Targeted Support: building a sustainable tutoring and targeted learning support market accessible to all.<sup>608</sup> The plan set out a series of interventions designed to pursue the three pillars, which would be rolled out from September 2021. Monitoring of implementation of the plan included a strengthened role for Ofsted which would inspect every school by 2024 and the tracking of progress through data collection. Delivery would also involve working with partners such as local authorities.<sup>609</sup> The plan built on the existing programme of education reform already underway and acknowledged that the scale of the challenge meant that it would need to be a long-term and evidence-based approach.

8.105. Following the meeting, DfE was asked to work with EDS, No.10 and the PMIU to develop the plan for metrics against which progress would be tracked; provide an assessment of deliverability of interventions; and develop a detailed implementation plan, with this work to be completed by the week commencing 3 May 2021. DfE was also asked to work with Ofsted: (i) to provide their best assessment for how learning had fallen during the pandemic and a detailed plan for data collection to measure progress; (ii) specific proposals for a refreshed Ofsted inspection framework, including a detailed implementation timeline for expanding inspections, analysis of extra capacity needed, and how these inspections will seek to target schools which need inspections most; (iii) detailed implementation plans,

<sup>604</sup> JF/660 - INQ000528282: Brief, NERT(PS) Lost Learning 23.04.21

<sup>605</sup> JF/661 - INQ000622775: NERT(PS) Secretariat Cover Note 22.04.21

<sup>606</sup> JF/662 - INQ000528275: Actions NERT(PS) 26.04.26

<sup>607</sup> JF/663 - INQ000528272: NERT Paper - Education Recovery 26.04.21

<sup>608</sup> JF/664 - INQ000528273: NERT Paper - Education Recovery Red Team Report 26.04.21

<sup>609</sup> JF/664 - INQ000528273: NERT Paper - Education Recovery Red Team Report 26.04.21; JF/665 - INQ000528274: NERT Paper - Overarching Recovery Narrative 21.04.21; JF/663 - INQ000528272: NERT Paper - Policy NERT PS 26.04.21

including timelines for producing guidance for schools and showing how interventions will reach those most in need; and (iv) a communications plan for engaging the sector and parents. Decisions from this meeting included recommending further assessment of the cost/benefit of interventions, the deliverability, and scalability of the options before announcing an education recovery package.<sup>610</sup>

- 8.106. A NERT(PS) meeting was held on 28 April 2021 to update the Prime Minister and agree key decisions and next steps. CDL outlined the need for lost learning interventions to be targeted towards those with the greatest need and to deliver measurable success.<sup>611</sup> CDL also outlined the proposals for further work: i) on the cost/benefit analysis of some options, in particular longer school days, the trade-offs between increasing teacher and tutor capacity versus teacher quality, and the targeting of the interventions to ensure they delivered for every pupil across the country ii) further work to measure success and monitor progress, including work to establish a baseline for the learning lost during the pandemic, development of clear metrics, and a plan for robust data collection across all age groups and key stages which would include an enhanced role for Ofsted, and iii) a clear implementation plan. These proposals were to be subject to funding discussions with HMT in due course.
- 8.107. The meeting considered a paper prepared by the Cabinet Office which outlined the lost learning problem and the proposed next steps. It summarised that the average pupil was expected to be 2.5 to 4.5 months behind in core subjects and this was greatest amongst disadvantaged groups. There was a need to develop a means of measuring and tracking the attainment gap over time to enable assessment of when it had closed. In early years, children's long-term wellbeing and school readiness had been damaged and more generally, the number of children with probable mental health disorders had risen from 1 in 9 to 1 in 6 in 2020. The interventions (the three Ts), and the proposed means of measuring and monitoring, were designed to recover lost learning for all pupils by 2024 and build a stronger and fairer education system, raising attainment standards, reducing the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils, and improving emotional well-being for every young person.<sup>612</sup>
- 8.108. The committee agreed that building on the progress to develop an education recovery plan, further work should be undertaken to identify the right mix of the three Ts and their scalability to recover lost learning, reduce the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils by 2024, and improve pupil wellbeing. DfE was to continue to work with NERT(PS) to establish the best possible baseline across all key stages, and metrics to measure progress and impact.<sup>613</sup>

---

<sup>610</sup> JF/662 - INQ000528275: Actions & Decisions, NERT 26.04.21 (exhibited at FN606)

<sup>611</sup> JF/666 - INQ000528278: Brief, NERT(PS) 27.04.21

<sup>612</sup> JF/667 - INQ000528277: NERT Slides 21.04.21

<sup>613</sup> JF/668 - INQ000528279: Actions and Decisions, NERT(PS) 28.04.21

- 8.109. In April 2021, discussions took place between the Education Recovery Commissioner, Lord Agnew and his Private Office (Lord Agnew was the Cabinet Office and HMT Minister, and member of the Education Recovery Advisory Committee) and the Special Adviser to the Prime Minister on Education, on the funding element of the Education Recovery Plan.<sup>614</sup> Lord Agnew also briefed the Chancellor on the plans and costs.<sup>615</sup> The funding for the Education Recovery Plan was subsequently considered by the Prime Minister in discussion with the Chancellor, and the Education Recovery Commissioner.<sup>616</sup>
- 8.110. NERT (PS) met once again on 20 May 2021 and discussed education and lost learning.<sup>617</sup> The Prime Minister had requested a publication to clearly set out the impact of COVID-19 on key public services, and CDL presented a paper<sup>618</sup> on the planned direction of this publication. The committee set actions to support development of the paper, and agreed it would focus primarily on three areas - education and lost learning, healthcare, and the justice system. On education, the committee noted that work had continued to progress since the 28 April 2021 NERT meeting, including £1.7 billion of funding to programmes to support catch-up and tutoring. The NERT(PS) secretariat provided a draft of the publication to No.10 for review on 21 May 2021. The Prime Minister decided not to publish it. Some of the proposals on healthcare that were being considered for this publication were ultimately published in September 2021 in 'Build Back Better: Our Plan for Health and Social Care'.
- 8.111. On 2 June 2021, DfE announced a package of measures<sup>619</sup> aimed at supporting the next step of education recovery. The package totalled £1.4 billion in funding - in addition to the £1.7 billion already announced in two previous packages - and comprised £1 billion toward tutoring for disadvantaged school children, and £400 million to help give early years practitioners and 500,000 school teachers across the country training and support, and fund schools and colleges to give some year 13 students the option to repeat their final year.
- 8.112. The measures included investment in tutoring, teacher training and the optional repetition of Year 13, in line with the Education Commissioner's recommendations. There followed some debate about funding the remaining proposals, such as extending school time and enrichment activities, introducing a school-led delivery model and additional mental health

<sup>614</sup> JF/669 - INQ000622785: Email – Lord Agnew to Education Recovery Commissioner 21.04.21; JF/670 - INQ000622784: Email – Meeting between Lord Agnew and Education Recovery Commissioner 21.04.21; JF/671 - INQ000622783: Email - Lord Agnew to Education Recovery Commissioner 23.04.21, JF/672 - INQ000622782: Email – Rory Gribbell to Lord Agnew 23.04.21; JF/673 - INQ000622786: Lord Agnew Agenda 27.04.21

<sup>615</sup> JF/674 - INQ000622781: Lord Agnew note to HMT 27.04.21

<sup>616</sup> JF/675 - INQ000622787: Update to PM 23.04.21; JF/676 - INQ000622816: Slide Deck - Update to PM 23.04.21; JF/677 - INQ000622788: PM Weekly Note 25.04.21; JF/678 - INQ000622789: BILAT PM Brief 28.04.21; JF/679 - INQ000622790: BILAT Agenda 28.04.21; JF/680 - INQ000622792: BILAT Read Out 29.04.21

<sup>617</sup> JF/681 - INQ000528280: Speaking Note for CDL, NERT (PS) 20.05.21

<sup>618</sup> JF/020 - INQ000528281: Paper - Impact of Covid-19 on Public Services for Education Gold 20.05.21

<sup>619</sup> JF/682 - INQ000541083: DfE Statement - Huge Expansion of Tutoring in Next Step of Education Recovery 02.06.21

support.<sup>620</sup> Some of the proposals were subject to further analysis, revised and taken forward in March 2022 under the Schools White Paper, such as mandating a minimum opening time for state schools.<sup>621</sup>

- 8.113. Across the summer period, NERT(PS) also met regularly to support the recovery of children's services. A note to CDL on 7 June 2021<sup>622</sup> summarising progress of the first stage of NERT(PS) meetings stated that following DfE's announcement on education recovery a further meeting on lost learning was not likely to be needed. Instead, DfE would provide written updates to the committee as their work progressed. Following this, NERT(PS) work on children and young people turned to the provision of Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services, also known as Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CAMHS/CYPMHS), and to the issues of persistent absence and vulnerable young people. The first NERT(PS) meeting on CAMHS was held on 17 June 2021, where the committee discussed the drivers and impact of the backlog in CAMHS.<sup>623</sup> The committee asked DHSC to work with a number of departments to improve and provide data on the prevalence of mental health illness in children and young people and the current provision and impact of CAMHS, and to provide a plan for how existing datasets would be improved.<sup>624</sup>
- 8.114. This work was continued at a CDL-chaired roundtable focused on CAMHS on 15 July 2021<sup>625</sup> which aimed to gain a further understanding of this issue to feed back to future NERT(PS) meetings. The roundtable noted that there had been a clear increase in the number of children and young people with mental illnesses, and in the complexity of these issues. This was especially the case for children in lower-income households, and had coincided with a reduction in access to services and increased pressure on teaching staff, which had resulted in less early prevention. Official-level work continued on this issue throughout the summer, and CDL was kept updated on progress.<sup>626</sup>
- 8.115. NERT(PS) met on the issue of vulnerable young people and persistent absence on 19 July 2021, and asked DfE to work to improve the data picture on persistent absences. The Cabinet Office was asked to support other departments to correlate existing persistent absence data with known external factors to provide a more detailed understanding of this issue. DfE was also asked to provide an analysis of the levers which could be applied to prevent children and young people from entering the criminal justice system and develop

---

<sup>620</sup> JF/683 - INQ000622791: Email: No.10 chain on Education Recovery funding 25.05.2021

<sup>621</sup> JF/684 - INQ000622797: Guidance, Opportunity for all, March 2022

<sup>622</sup> JF/685 - INQ000546671: Note to CDL Summarising Progress of NERT(PS) 07.06.21

<sup>623</sup> JF/021 - INQ000528287: Minutes, NERT (PS) 17.06.21

<sup>624</sup> JF/686 - INQ000528285: Actions, NERT(PS) 17.06.21

<sup>625</sup> JF/687 - INQ000528292: Readout - Public Service Recovery Roundtable 15.07.21

<sup>626</sup> For instance JF/688 - INQ000546613: Update to CDL on on Children and Young People's Mental Health Services 05.08.21

proposed interventions to tackle persistent absences. The deadline for all of these tasks was set at 6 September 2021, after which NERT(PS) would meet again to discuss these issues.

- 8.116. In October 2021, following the appointment of a new CDL,<sup>627</sup> NERT(PS) was replaced by the Domestic and Economic (Operations) Committee. Work to support vulnerable children continued at official level and in other forums, with DfE and the CTF covering these issues in Education Gold meetings throughout autumn and winter 2021.<sup>628</sup>

---

<sup>627</sup> JF/689 - INQ000546755: No.10 Statement - Ministerial Appointments 15.09.21

<sup>628</sup> For instance JF/690 - INQ000546554: Covid Taskforce SitRep 22.11.21, JF/691 - INQ000546561: Covid Taskforce SitRep 18.10.21 SitReps

## 9. THEOMICRON VARIANT AND LIVING WITH COVID

### Summary

- 9.1. In late 2021, a new variant of COVID-19 drove a further wave of the virus but ultimately school closures were not required. On 27 November 2021, the Government announced that the first cases of what was later designated the Omicron variant had been identified in the UK. Targeted, precautionary measures were announced the same day. COVID-O continued to meet frequently to monitor the variant and consider the response, which included agreeing additional restrictions on 8 December 2021, in line with the previously agreed 'Plan B' (see paragraph 9.9). The overarching aim of Omicron measures, which included tougher face coverings guidance for schools and public places, was to avoid any further lockdowns and allow time for increased uptake of booster vaccines.
- 9.2. The Cabinet Office including No.10 undertook work with DfE to help ensure that schools could reopen after the holidays. The Prime Minister agreed that face coverings in secondary classrooms should be advised. DfE encouraged retired teachers to re-enter the workplace to reduce the occurrence of school closures due to staff absence. DfE and CTF presented regularly on the topic throughout this period to ensure schools were prioritised.
- 9.3. The combination of the accelerated booster roll-out and public compliance with the Plan B measures helped reduce the spread of the variant. On 27 January 2022, England moved back to Plan A. On 21 February 2022, the Government published the 'Living with COVID-19' strategy, which announced the removal of remaining domestic restrictions in England.

### Discovery of Omicron and response to the Variant

- 9.4. On 25 November 2021 COVID-O met<sup>629</sup> to discuss a concerning new variant - designated then as B.1.1.529, and later 'Omicron' - which had been reported to the WHO by South Africa. The minutes of the meeting record that the CMO said there were 52 recorded cases in South Africa, and that cases had also been discovered in Botswana. The CMO also noted that the variant included a worrying number of mutations, and was 'spreading very quickly in a highly immune population'. The committee agreed to targeted, precautionary measures including the temporary suspension of direct flights from 6 Southern African countries. That evening, UKHSA designated B.1.1.529 as a variant under investigation (VuI), and the Government made a statement announcing the new travel restrictions.<sup>630</sup>

---

<sup>629</sup> JF/692 - INQ000092222: Minutes, COVID-O, 25.11.21

<sup>630</sup> JF/693 - INQ000546741: Press release - '6 African countries added to red list to protect public health as UK designates new variant under investigation', 25.11.21

- 9.5. On 26 November 2021, the WHO announced Omicron was a new COVID-19 Variant of Concern. The Health Secretary made a statement to the House of Commons, also on 26 November 2021, outlining the risks associated with the new variant, which included the possibility of higher transmissibility, and possible immune escape.
- 9.6. On 27 November 2021, the UK Government announced that the first cases of the variant had been identified in the UK. The Prime Minister chaired a COVID-O meeting<sup>631</sup>, for which the CTF provided a slidepack<sup>632</sup> recommending a package of measures. Alongside tougher test, trace and isolate measures, the package included compulsory face coverings in shops and on public transport. The committee agreed<sup>633</sup> to announce the introduction of new measures in a press conference that afternoon.
- 9.7. On the afternoon of 27 November 2021, the Prime Minister announced the new measures.<sup>634</sup> In schools, face coverings were once again recommended in communal spaces for all staff, visitors and pupils in Year 7 and above.<sup>635</sup> Teachers were asked to encourage students to test twice weekly, and the Government reiterated that all children over the age of 12 should take up the offer of vaccination if able to do so. The isolation exception for school pupils was also removed for close contacts of Omicron cases, who were asked to isolate for 10 days.
- 9.8. On 30 November 2021, the Prime Minister made a statement on vaccination.<sup>636</sup> The JCVI had, the day before, offered a second dose of the vaccine to all 12-15 year olds, and a booster to all adults, and the Prime Minister urged everyone to step forward when invited to be vaccinated. This later became the 'Get Boosted Now' campaign.
- 9.9. COVID-O met on 4 December 2021<sup>637</sup> and again on 8 December 2021<sup>638</sup> to discuss the Omicron response. The CTF provided papers<sup>639</sup> for both meetings.<sup>640</sup> On 8 December 2021, COVID-O agreed to move to the Plan B package, which included face masks becoming compulsory in most public indoor venues, mandatory certification in specific settings, and advice to work from home if possible. Later the same day, the Prime Minister announced<sup>641</sup> the move to Plan B measures, noting that Omicron was growing much faster than the

<sup>631</sup> JF/694 - INQ000092196: Minutes, COVID-O 27.11.21

<sup>632</sup> JF/695 - INQ000146803: Slidepack - 'B.1.1.529 (Omicron) Response', 27.11.21

<sup>633</sup> JF/696 - INQ000092181: Actions, COVID-O 27.11.21

<sup>634</sup> JF/697 - INQ000055627: Public address - PM opening statement at Covid-19 press conference, 27.11.21

<sup>635</sup> JF/698 - INQ000546775: DfE Blog - 'What the new temporary COVID-19 measures mean for early year settings, out-of-school settings, schools, colleges and universities', 28.11.21

<sup>636</sup> JF/699 - INQ000086803: Public address - 'PM opening statement at Covid-19 Press Conference', 30.11.21

<sup>637</sup> JF/700 - INQ000092227: Minutes, COVID-O 04.12.21

<sup>638</sup> JF/701 - INQ000092202: Minutes, COVID-O 08.12.21

<sup>639</sup> JF/702 - INQ000413440: Paper - 'Consideration of Border Measures in Response to Omicron' (CTF) 04.12.21;

JF/703 - INQ000064259: Paper - 'COVID-19 Response: Omicron' (CTF) 08.12.21

<sup>640</sup> JF/704 - INQ000546744: Guidance - 'Covid-19 Response: Autumn and Winter Plan 2021', updated 09.11.21

<sup>641</sup> JF/705 - INQ000086632: Press Release - 'Prime Minister confirms move to Plan B in England', 08.12.21

previous Delta variant, and that the new measures would give the UK time to improve take-up of booster shots and better understand the new variant.

- 9.10. With the Government's response to Omicron in place, its effectiveness was monitored in a range of ways. As a period of emergency, there were COBR meetings - beginning with Dashboard updates from the Taskforce - on 10, 15 and 19 December 2021. The first and second of these COBR meetings were chaired by the Minister for Intergovernmental Relations and the third was chaired by the CDL. The Taskforce continued to meet frequently with the Prime Minister, the No.10 team, advisers and other officials to monitor and review the data and consider the policy options in case further action was needed.
- 9.11. The spread of Omicron put pressure on workforces across the economy. Starting with a COVID-O meeting on 17 December 2021, there was a set of 12 meetings over 22 days, chaired by the CDL or Paymaster General, which looked at the different sectors and the planning and responses which were in place. On 22 December 2021, COVID-O<sup>642</sup> met to discuss education in relation to the issue of workforce impacts. The Cabinet Office Supply Chain Unit provided a paper on this topic.<sup>643</sup> Recognising that keeping education settings open was a priority, the committee discussed options for mitigating impacts on the education workforce. The Education Secretary explained a number of further protection measures were to be introduced from the start of the new term to boost confidence in the system, which included face coverings for students in year 7 and above. DfE shared work undertaken to recruit retired and former teachers to support the existing workforce and manage the possibility of increased staff absence. DfE was asked to perform further analysis on workforce absence by 23 December 2021, and was set a number of actions to ensure plans were in place to mitigate the impacts of workforce shortages should they arise.
- 9.12. On 30 December 2021, the Prime Minister received a slidepack from the CTF<sup>644</sup> outlining advice from DfE that face coverings should be recommended in classrooms for year 7 and above from the start of term. The Prime Minister agreed to this advice on 31 December 2021,<sup>645</sup> and the January schools guidance was updated to reflect this change. A DfE press release on 2 January 2022<sup>646</sup> announced the updated guidance.
- 9.13. An update on schools was provided to COVID-O<sup>647</sup> on 7 January 2022. The committee noted that the request for retired staff to return to the sector had been successful, with a number of agencies reporting increased staff availability, and that the rate of infections in schools had

---

<sup>642</sup> JF/706 - INQ000104607: Minutes, COVID-O 22.12.21

<sup>643</sup> JF/707 - INQ000104613: Paper - 'Omicron, Workforce Impacts' (CO Supply Chain Unit), 22.12.21

<sup>644</sup> JF/708 - INQ000546681: PM Slidepack - 'Covid - risks and disruption', 30.12.21

<sup>645</sup> JF/709 - INQ000546679: Email - 'face coverings in schools' 31.12.21

<sup>646</sup> JF/710 - INQ000546756: Press release - 'More support to keep pupils in classroom', 01.01.22

<sup>647</sup> JF/711 - INQ000104603: Minutes, COVID-O 07.01.22

remained stable compared to before Christmas. The committee also noted that while feedback from the sector on the Government's communications was good, it was important to continue to focus on ensuring regulations were accurately communicated.

9.14. On 19 January 2022, Cabinet met to review the Plan B measures.<sup>648</sup> The CTF produced a paper<sup>649</sup> recommending that Cabinet agree to return to Plan A, which would end mandatory certification; work from home guidance, and face coverings in all settings. The paper specifically recommended that face coverings guidance for education should end, with students and staff no longer advised to wear face coverings in teaching spaces or communal areas. Cabinet agreed to the recommendations in the paper, which were announced by the Prime Minister later that day<sup>650</sup>. Confirmation that face coverings no longer need to be worn in classrooms came into effect on 20 January 2022, or in communal areas of schools and colleges on 27 January 2022<sup>651</sup>.

9.15. COVID-O met again on 20 January 2022 to update on workforce absences in schools and early-years settings.<sup>652</sup> The committee set actions for CTF, No.10 and DfE to run an exercise the following week to ensure that the Government was fully prepared for any further increase in workforce absence in schools, and CTF was asked to report back by 26 January 2022.<sup>653</sup> This work was taken forward, and the report was brought to COVID-O on 27 January and circulated to No.10 on 28 January 2022<sup>654</sup>.

#### Schools testing and Living With Covid

9.16. COVID-O met on 8 February 2022<sup>655</sup> to discuss whether to continue twice weekly testing in education settings. The CTF provided a paper<sup>656</sup> and had obtained agreement from DfE, HMT, UKHSA and DHSC that routine asymptomatic testing should end in schools. The paper laid out two possible dates for announcing this - on 10 February 2022, or as part of the announcement of the Government's 'Living with Covid' strategy, which was expected to be published on 21 February 2022 (see below). COVID-O agreed to the proposals,<sup>657</sup> and the CTF was asked to send a note to No.10 that evening requesting a final decision on the

---

<sup>648</sup> JF/712 - INQ000089038: Minutes, Cabinet 19.01.22

<sup>649</sup> JF/713 - INQ000089035: Paper - 'Covid-19 Response: Plan B' (CTF) 19.01.22; JF/714 - INQ000089036: 'Plan B review: Analysis Pack' (CTF) 18.01.22

<sup>650</sup> JF/715 - INQ000075762: PM statement to House of Commons on Covid-19, 19.01.22

<sup>651</sup> JF/716 - INQ000075763: DfE Education Hub - Facemasks in classrooms are no longer required 19.01.22

<sup>652</sup> JF/717 - INQ000104606: Minutes, COVID-O 20.01.22

<sup>653</sup> JF/718 - INQ000104584: Actions, COVID-O 20.01.22

<sup>654</sup> JF/719 - INQ000104587: Minutes, COVID-O 27.01.22, JF/720 - INQ000546680: Slides - Workforce absence Scenarios (DfE) 21.01.22; JF/721 - INQ000546604: Workforce Wargaming Session Report (DfE, CO, No.10) 25.01.22 (mis-titled 2021), JF/722 - INQ000546603: email from CTF circulating Workforce Wargaming Session Report

<sup>655</sup> JF/723 - INQ000091581: Minutes, COVID-O 08.02.22

<sup>656</sup> JF/724 - INQ000075653: Paper - 'Ending Routine Asymptomatic Education Testing' (CTF) 08.02.22

<sup>657</sup> JF/725 - INQ000091600: Actions and Decisions, COVID-O, 08.02.22

announcement date from the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister decided that this should be announced on 21 February 2022.<sup>658</sup>

9.17. On 18 February 2022, CDL, the Chancellor, the Health Secretary, CMO and CSA met to discuss the approach to 'Living with Covid'.<sup>659</sup> Following this discussion, No.10 fed back that the Prime Minister was strongly of the view that the Living with Covid strategy should include: the removal of outstanding legal restrictions; a significant reduction in ongoing Covid response costs; and the necessary contingency infrastructure to enable response structures to stand back up quickly at the lowest possible cost<sup>660</sup>.

9.18. On 21 February 2022, the Government published its strategy for the removal of all remaining legal restrictions, but which maintained the structures necessary to respond to new COVID-19 risks should they arise: 'Covid-19 Response: Living with COVID-19'.<sup>661</sup> The strategy stated that:

9.18.1. "The Government's objective in the next phase of the COVID-19 response is to enable the country to manage COVID-19 like other respiratory illnesses, while minimising mortality and retaining the ability to respond if a new variant emerges with more dangerous properties than the Omicron variant, or during periods of waning immunity, that could again threaten to place the NHS under unsustainable pressure.

9.18.2. To meet this objective, the Government will structure its ongoing response around four principles:

9.18.3. Living with COVID-19: removing domestic restrictions while encouraging safer behaviours through public health advice, in common with longstanding ways of managing most other respiratory illnesses;

9.18.4. Protecting people most vulnerable to COVID-19: vaccination guided by Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) advice, and deploying targeted testing;

9.18.5. Maintaining resilience: ongoing surveillance, contingency planning and the ability to reintroduce key capabilities such as mass vaccination and testing in an emergency; and

---

<sup>658</sup> JF/726 - INQ000546565: Email No.10 'Schools Testing' 10.02.22

<sup>659</sup> JF/727 - INQ000064430: Paper - Covid-19 Data Briefing (CO) 18.02.22; JF/728 - INQ000064431: Paper - 'UKHSA Covid-19 Strategy: Adapting our strategy in response to the next phase of the pandemic' (for QUAD 18.02.22); JF/729 - INQ000064432: Quad Slides re Living with Covid' (CO) 18.02.22

<sup>660</sup> JF/730 - INQ000198240: Readout - Covid Trilateral, 18 February 2022

<sup>661</sup> JF/731 - INQ000086652: 'COVID-19 RESPONSE - LIVING WITH COVID' February 2022

9.18.6. Securing innovations and opportunities from the COVID-19 response, including investment in life sciences.”

- 9.19. As part of the strategy and in line with the decision by COVID-O (paragraph 9.16), from 21 February 2022, the Government removed guidance for staff and students in most education and childcare settings to undertake twice weekly asymptomatic testing. The Government also confirmed that from 1 April 2022, free universal symptomatic and asymptomatic testing would end for the general public in England. Instead, there would be limited symptomatic testing available for a small number of at-risk groups and free symptomatic testing would remain available to social care staff.
- 9.20. From 24 February 2022, the Government ended the use of COVID-19 legal restrictions. On 25 March 2022, most temporary provisions in the Coronavirus Act expired without renewal,<sup>662</sup> ending the additional powers granted to the Government during the pandemic.

---

<sup>662</sup> JF/732 - INQ000546746: Press Release - ‘Expiry of the Coronavirus Act’s temporary provisions’, 02.03.22

## 10. CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN

### Summary

- 10.1. Protecting vulnerable children and young people, including those in social care, was a focus for the Government throughout the pandemic. As the lead government department for safeguarding, detailed policy work relating to children's social care was led by DfE. The role of the Cabinet Office, as with other policy areas, was to provide advice to the Prime Minister and CDL where necessary, to act as a critical friend to DfE to support policymaking and, as required, to facilitate cross-government decision making and collaboration, particularly where policymaking reached further than the remit of a single department, in this instance, DfE. Data relating to vulnerable children and children's social care was, where available, integrated into the Dashboard. Further work to assess and monitor the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable children is detailed further in Section 11.
- 10.2. Pre-pandemic preparedness work included an element of planning focussed on identifying vulnerable and priority groups, which encompassed children supported by social services. High-level guidance signalled to local responders that vulnerable children should be factored into plans, but the guidance was not prescriptive around how to achieve this. Later work on the pandemic influenza plan included the closing of schools as a potential measure to limit transmission, with a focus on safeguarding and an acknowledgement of the potential impacts on the social care sector.
- 10.3. In the run up to the first lockdown, active consideration was given to how a decision to close schools would impact the needs of vulnerable children, including the pressures on children's social care and those dependent on free school meals.<sup>663</sup> From the outset and throughout the pandemic, the government's position was that vulnerable children needed to be in school for safeguarding reasons.
- 10.4. The impacts on vulnerable children and young people (VCYP) were monitored by the Cabinet Office throughout the pandemic, sometimes in deep dives or stocktakes, and often in regular forums such as the GPSMIG and COVID-O. These meetings addressed wider issues and vulnerabilities in the population - such as disability, clinical vulnerability, the impact of NPIs on certain groups and economic support for low-income families. Examples of meetings that included children and young people as part of wider discussions and the formulation of measures are set out throughout this statement.

---

<sup>663</sup> JF/082 - INQ000056179: Cabinet Secretariat Paper for COBR 09.03.20

Cabinet Office oversight during the relevant period

- 10.5. As noted at paragraph 4.31 above, one of the actions arising from the GPSMIG held on 24 March 2020 was for the Home Office and DfE to work on safeguarding vulnerable children from increased risk of exploitation and abuse at home.<sup>664</sup>
- 10.6. On 26 March 2020, the Office of the Children's Commissioner produced an advice note for the Cabinet Office addressing the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable children and the action being taken by local authorities to continue to protect children in contact with statutory social care.<sup>665</sup> The same day, the C-19 Secretariat convened an officials meeting to discuss the issues emerging in the children's social care system and for vulnerable children more generally.<sup>666</sup> That meeting was chaired by the GPSMIG Secretariat and took place on 30 March 2020.<sup>667</sup> Discussion at the meeting was supported by advice from DfE addressing the key risks facing VCYP and the steps which the department had taken and planned to take to tackle them.<sup>668</sup> Following the meeting, DfE was commissioned to produce an updated paper addressing, amongst other matters, the support it required from other government departments.<sup>669</sup>
- 10.7. As noted at paragraph 4.32 above, the subject of children in care and vulnerable children was discussed at a GPSMIG meeting on 1 April 2020.<sup>670</sup> Advice from DfE, entitled 'Keeping vulnerable children and young people safe from increased risks of exploitation and abuse Covid-19',<sup>671</sup> identified actions which the department had taken, including the establishment of local teams staffed jointly by DfE and Ofsted known as REACT. The purpose of REACT was to bring stakeholders together to support local areas and to deploy inspectors into local authorities. In a briefing to CDL, who chaired the meeting, Cabinet Office officials questioned whether the cohort identified in DfE's paper adequately covered all vulnerable children and whether data gathering was sufficiently comprehensive and robust to track vulnerable children in and out of school, and to monitor the efficacy of the proposed interventions.<sup>672</sup> As a result, DfE was commissioned to work with others to develop a live, automated dashboard for tracking the number and type of vulnerable children attending school against available capacity.<sup>673</sup>

---

<sup>664</sup> JF/109 - INQ000056008: Actions and Decisions, GPSMIG 24.03.20

<sup>665</sup> JF/733 - INQ000546670: Advice Note on Vulnerable Children and Covid-19, 26.03.20

<sup>666</sup> JF/734 - INQ000546589: Email, O meeting on vulnerable children, 26.03.20

<sup>667</sup> JF/735 - INQ000137523: Email, Agenda and paper for O meeting on vulnerable children at 15:00, 30.03.20

<sup>668</sup> JF/736 - INQ000137524: DfE Paper on Keeping vulnerable children and young people safe from increased risks of exploitation and abuse, 30.03.20

<sup>669</sup> JF/737 - INQ000546583: Email, GPSMIG Commission on vulnerable children, 30.03.20

<sup>670</sup> JF/738 - INQ000083362: Agenda, GPSMIG 01.04.20

<sup>671</sup> JF/739 - INQ000083361: DfE Paper on Keeping vulnerable children and young people safe from increased risks of exploitation and abuse, April 2020

<sup>672</sup> JF/740 - INQ000083363: Chair's brief, GPSMIG, 01.04.20

<sup>673</sup> JF/112 - INQ000083356: Actions and Decision, GPSMIG 01.04.20

- 10.8. On 2 April 2020, the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit undertook policy work on the impact of social distancing policies on the delivery of public services and the wellbeing of citizens. The resulting report identified an increased risk of harm for vulnerable children arising from closer contact with abusive families and a reduction in the supply of social workers.<sup>674</sup>
- 10.9. In April 2020, the Cabinet Office identified SROs to improve planning and coordination of the priority programmes contributing to the COVID-19 response effort. The DfE Director General for Children's Social Care was assigned as SRO for the vulnerable children workstream and on 3 April 2020, was commissioned to produce a plan for the delivery of priority actions in respect of vulnerable children.<sup>675</sup> The first iteration of that plan, dated 7 April 2020,<sup>676</sup> identified two key strands to the delivery of this programme: first, to encourage vulnerable children and young people to attend education settings; and second, to keep children and young people safe from increased risks of serious harm, exploitation and abuse. Delivery of the latter strand required cross-government coordination with DHSC, MHCLG and DCMS amongst others to ensure the provision of adequate PPE to the care workforce, to secure and deliver funding to local authorities and to provide devices and connectivity to vulnerable cohorts to enable them to maintain social worker contact.
- 10.10. As noted at paragraph 4.34, the interests of vulnerable children were discussed at a GPSMIG meeting on 7 April 2020. To improve safeguarding, DfE identified as an immediate priority the need to increase the number of vulnerable children attending school. It also recognised there was a need to support vulnerable children who were not attending school through other means, such as by supporting the children's social care system.<sup>677</sup> DfE was tasked to accelerate joint work with the Home Office to protect vulnerable children, including those at risk from online harm, domestic abuse and exploitation by county lines gangs, working with local and central government.<sup>678</sup>

#### Hidden crimes

- 10.11. The Home Office presented advice at a GPSMIG meeting on 14 April 2020<sup>679</sup> which explained that vulnerable groups (including children) were at increased risk of hidden crimes, abuse and neglect because of restricted attendance at schools, social distancing measures

---

<sup>674</sup> JF/741 - INQ000546726: PMIU Paper on Social distancing impacts, 02.04.20, p.30

<sup>675</sup> JF/742 - INQ000546669: Email, Vulnerable Children Priority 02.04.20; JF/743 - INQ000546539: Cabinet Secretary Letter to DfE Permanent Secretary on Portfolio Management', 11.05.20

<sup>676</sup> JF/744 - INQ000546535: DfE Draft Delivery Plan for Vulnerable Children and Young People, 07.04.20; JF/745 - INQ000546543: Cover Note

<sup>677</sup> JF/117 - INQ000267986: DfE Paper on School Provision 06.04.20

<sup>678</sup> JF/118 - INQ000083392: Actions, GPSMIG 07.04.2020

<sup>679</sup> JF/746 - INQ000083427: Email, 13.04.20; JF/747 - INQ000274225: Agenda, GPSMIG 14.04.20; JF/748 - INQ000274226: HO Paper on Hidden Crimes

and increased online exposure. To enable an effective safeguarding response, the HO identified several cross-cutting requirements. These included liaising with DfE and DHSC to prepare for the anticipated increase in reporting following the easing of lockdown restrictions, to ensure that frontline workers had access to PPE, testing and childcare and to improve school attendance amongst vulnerable pupils. The HO also planned to work with DCMS to reduce online harms and to ensure vulnerable families and victims of crime were prioritised for electronic devices and connectivity provisions to enable them to access support services. The committee agreed further action with the HO to address hidden crimes.<sup>680</sup>

- 10.12. As a result, a Hidden Harms virtual summit was hosted by the Prime Minister on 21 May 2020, which was preceded by discussion at Cabinet that same day<sup>681</sup>. At Cabinet, the Home Secretary explained that the aim of the summit was “to develop an action plan that would protect vulnerable people as restrictions eased, taking a cross-Government and multi-agency approach”. In discussion, schools were acknowledged as being a vital part of the picture as they could identify and address harm to young people, and that the close collaboration that had built up between schools, local authorities and the health service in this context should be preserved.
- 10.13. The Hidden Harms summit focussed on how to tackle crimes such as domestic abuse, sexual abuse, child sexual abuse and modern slavery, which may have been impacted by the lockdown. Sessions were delivered by the Home Secretary, the Lord Chancellor and the Education Secretary and attended by representatives from law enforcement, the criminal justice system, victims’ charities and the private sector. At the summit, the Home Secretary announced that the HO had allocated £9.86 million to the National Crime Agency to improve its ability to tackle online perpetrators of child sexual abuse, and £3.36 million to understanding and tackle the child sexual abuse threat. A further £2.8 million transformation fund was also announced in order to promote and embed best practice in Child Sexual Abuse victim support. Further measures to promote child safety online and improve reporting of safeguarding concerns were announced.<sup>682</sup>
- 10.14. This resulting report, published on 26 June 2020, contained some immediate next steps to respond to the issues raised, as well as a commitment to ensuring adequate support for vulnerable children was embedded in recovery planning. A wide range of recommendations from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, the Children’s Commissioner, Victims’ Commissioner and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner on child exploitation and

---

<sup>680</sup> JF/749 - INQ000083432: Actions and Decisions, GPSMIG 14.04.20

<sup>681</sup> JF/203 - INQ000089051: Minutes, Cabinet 21.05.20

<sup>682</sup> JF/750 - INQ000546767: Weblink to Report on Prime Minister’s Virtual summit on Hidden Harms, 26.06.20

safeguarding measures were included in the report, with the aim of ensuring that adequate support for vulnerable children was embedded in recovery planning.<sup>683</sup>

*Delivering the plan for vulnerable children and young people*

- 10.15. An updated version of DfE's delivery plan for vulnerable children, dated 14 April 2020<sup>684</sup> introduced a third strand to the delivery plan, relating to recovery planning. The purpose of this strand was to ensure that VCYP made progress in their education and development to prevent them from falling further behind their peers.
- 10.16. At a Cabinet Meeting on 16 April 2020, concerns were noted about vulnerable children, many of whom were not in school at a time when social workers were unable to visit their homes. It was noted that local authorities had been asking for more flexibility to address such concerns.<sup>685</sup>
- 10.17. The GPSMIG met on 17 April 2020 and discussed supporting vulnerable children.<sup>686</sup> Advice from DfE entitled 'Vulnerable children and young people: progress and next steps', provided an update on the progress against its delivery plan for VCYP. To measure progress in school attendance and safeguarding of vulnerable children, DfE proposed as a target to know that schools and local authorities had had contact with every known vulnerable child and young person in each local authority area in England. DfE also announced the launch of a vulnerable children dashboard which collated information and intelligence on VCYP gathered from schools and REACT teams, amongst others. DfE proposed to expand the sources of data for the dashboard to include details of local authority contact with VCYP. In discussion, it was noted that the re-registration of social workers who had left the profession had increased the size of the workforce and that, subject to spending approval, a funding package of £108 million would be announced to support children in need and care leavers.<sup>687</sup>
- 10.18. An updated version of the VCYP Delivery Plan dated 19 April 2020<sup>688</sup> set out the cross-government approach to address the increased needs of vulnerable children and young people and their families to support positive education, safeguarding and wellbeing outcomes in order to mitigate key risks facing VCYP and their families, and risks to the systems and delivery of services to support VCYP. The C-19 PMO periodically reviewed and fed back on further iterations of the plan.<sup>689</sup>

---

<sup>683</sup> JF/751 - INQ000527682: Report on Prime Minister's Virtual Summit on Hidden Harms 26.06.20

<sup>684</sup> JF/752 - INQ000546544: DfE Delivery Plan for Vulnerable Children and Young People, 14.04.20

<sup>685</sup> JF/753 - INQ000089020: Minutes, Cabinet 16.04.20

<sup>686</sup> JF/754 - INQ000083446: Agenda, GPSMIG 17.04.20; JF/755 - INQ000083598: Chair's Brief, GPSMIG 17.04.20

<sup>687</sup> JF/756 - INQ000083599: Minutes, GPSMIG, 17.04.20

<sup>688</sup> JF/757 - INQ000540867: DfE Delivery Plan for Vulnerable Children and Young People, 19.04.20

<sup>689</sup> For instance JF/758 - INQ000546540: Cabinet Office, C-19 Delivery Plan Feedback, 03.08.20

Volunteering and vulnerable programme

- 10.19. At a GPSMIG meeting on 6 May 2020, Simon Case - then a Director General in the Cabinet Office - presented the first iteration of the Dashboard for the volunteering and vulnerable programme, which was stood-up by the Cabinet Office at the end of April 2020 and consolidated multiple strands of work under the ministerial leadership of CDL.<sup>690</sup> The Dashboard was to “be a standing item each week to allow GPSMIG to look at performance and discuss how to remove any obstacles to the delivery of support to vulnerable groups”. It included the data on VCYP provided by DfE.<sup>691</sup> From the following week, GPSMIG was to hold a deep-dive on one or two programmes each week, starting on 21 May 2020 with a deep-dive on vulnerable children.
- 10.20. On 21 May 2020, GPSMIG undertook a deep dive on VCYP, and considered issues related to disability and free school meals. DfE’s Minister for Children and Families presented a paper which noted that 508,000 VCYP were facing significant challenges arising from prolonged lockdown and its wider social impacts, increasing both the volume and the complexity of need.<sup>692</sup> An action was taken by all departments to work with DfE on restoring services for vulnerable children in their recovery plans. A further action was taken by DfE to work with the Devolved Administrations to share information about the demand for children’s services, including considering international examples of restoration of services post-lockdown.<sup>693</sup> The analysis contained a dashboard with data on Local Authorities of concern. Following an enquiry from CDL on which Local Authorities were performing best in terms of getting vulnerable children into schools, an action was taken by DfE and MHCLG to review and share which schools and local authorities had been most successful in supporting the return of children to school, and why, and to review the trajectory of attendance in education settings.
- 10.21. A GPSMIG meeting on 21 May 2020 also considered advice from the Cabinet Office on the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people which included statistics segmented by age and referred to the impact on education as being a key issue. The paper noted that DfE was to provide ‘an additional £10 million for the Family Fund trust to help low income families with disabled children, and providing basic IT and internet access to those who need it, which will include children and young people with SEND’.<sup>694</sup>

---

<sup>690</sup> JF/759 - INQ000137209: Paper - Proposal for governance of Shielded, Non-Shielded Vulnerable and Volunteering programmes, 26.04.20

<sup>691</sup> JF/760 - INQ000083570: Dashboard - ‘Draft Weekly Vulnerable and Volunteering Dashboard’, GPSMIG 14.05.20

<sup>692</sup> JF/146 - INQ000083588: DfE Paper on Vulnerable Children and Young People 20.05.20

<sup>693</sup> JF/761 - INQ000272124: Actions, GPSMIG 21.05.20

<sup>694</sup> JF/762 - INQ000083584: Cabinet Office Disability Unit Paper on the impact of Covid 19 on disabled people May 2020

- 10.22. At the meeting, an update was also provided on the provision of free school meals, with DfE's Minister for Children and Families noting that the scheme had provided over £90 million worth of food to vulnerable children, but that continued cross-government working was required to ensure there would be a solution in place for these children at the end of the summer term. The readout notes that, in discussion, the HMT minister relayed the Chancellor and Chief Secretary to the Treasury's concern about any extension, noting they did not support extending funding, and noting the Chancellor had made clear that he did not see the case for going further. The readout notes that CDL agreed with the minister's point, adding that the Chancellor had been willing to extend over Easter but it was appreciated that HMT could not fund free school meals for all during half term.<sup>695</sup>
- 10.23. On 21 May 2020, Cabinet discussed the importance of taking a multi-agency and cross-government approach to protecting vulnerable people.<sup>696</sup> Two points were raised dealing with risks to children and young people. First, that some of the most severe offences were happening online and internet providers had to take more responsibility to address issues such as child exploitation and abuse. Second, schools were able to identify and address harms to young people and so were a vital part of the picture. School attendance had risen from 29,000 to 77,000 children with schools and local authorities working much more closely together. The point was made that this collaboration should be preserved as the UK emerged from the pandemic. The Hidden Harms virtual summit, noted earlier at paragraph 10.12, took place that same day.
- 10.24. In June 2020, the Cabinet Office held a series of joint workshops with DfE to identify and address gaps in the department's delivery plan for vulnerable children. The workshops were attended by officials from the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit, the Cabinet Office, the C-19 PMO, DfE's Vulnerable Children Cell and DfE analysts. Discussion focused on the metrics which DfE was using to measure progress in VCYP school attendance, attainment and skills, safeguarding and wellbeing.<sup>697</sup> Following feedback provided in these workshops, DfE updated its delivery plan for VCYP.<sup>698</sup>
- 10.25. As the lead department for vulnerable children, DfE created new governance structures to oversee the implementation of the VCYP delivery plan. In June 2020, it established a VCYP Programme Board to review the delivery plan, monitor progress and scrutinise whether risks to VCYP were being sufficiently mitigated.<sup>699</sup> The first meeting of the VCYP Programme

<sup>695</sup> JF/763 - INQ000083626, Readout, GSPMIG 21.05.20

<sup>696</sup> JF/203 - INQ000089051: Minutes, Cabinet 21.05.20

<sup>697</sup> JF/764 - INQ000546546: Email, Follow-up from metrics mini workshops: readout and actions, 18.06.20

<sup>698</sup> JF/765 - INQ000546547: Paper on Government approach to vulnerable children and young people, March-April 2020

<sup>699</sup> JF/766 - INQ000546545: Draft Terms of Reference for VCYP Covid-19 Delivery Plan Programme Board, June 2020

Board took place on 15 June 2020.<sup>700</sup> CTF officials were not members of the Board but attended meetings when necessary.

- 10.26. On 3 July 2020, the C-19 PMO commissioned the SRO for Vulnerable Children to produce a winter preparedness plan.<sup>701</sup> An early draft of the plan was received by the C-19 PMO on 16 July and feedback was provided on 21 July.<sup>702</sup> The plan acknowledged that a significant resurgence in the virus over winter was likely to place VCYP at greater risk of harm. To deliver greater support to VCYP under heightened restrictions, DfE was contemplating increasing its expectations in terms of school attendance, frequency of local contact and quality of education provision to VCYP. During the autumn, DfE reviewed and updated its winter plan for VCYP following feedback from CTF and other partners.<sup>703</sup>
- 10.27. The VCYP Programme Board met on 11 November 2020 to address the impact of new national restrictions upon the provision of critical services for VCYP.<sup>704</sup> Discussion at the meeting was supported by a programme dashboard<sup>705</sup> and a paper summarising the effect of lockdown exemptions upon the continuation of a wide range of services affecting VCYP including education, childcare, children's social care, respite care and wellbeing services.<sup>706</sup> The key questions for consideration were whether the exemptions would be effective, whether stakeholders were sufficiently aware of their scope and where potential gaps remained in the safeguarding of VCYP. Staff absences, workforce fatigue and low morale were identified during discussion as risks to the delivery of services to support VCYP. To protect these services, clear messages were being sent that school nurses, safeguarding nurses and health visitors were not to be re-deployed during the second lockdown save in exceptional circumstances. Actions included working with OGDs on key services to understand usage data and agree thresholds for intervention.<sup>707</sup>
- 10.28. On 13 November 2020, CTF commissioned a paper from DfE in preparation for a cross-government deep dive session on vulnerable children.<sup>708</sup> The meeting, chaired by the CTF, took place on 27 November 2020.<sup>709</sup> Discussion at the meeting was assisted by an

---

<sup>700</sup> JF/767 - INQ000546814: Agenda, VCYP Programme Board 15.06.20; JF/768 - INQ000541091: VCYP Programme Dashboard June 2020

<sup>701</sup> JF/769 - INQ000546809: Email - COVID-S WINTER COMMISSIONS: for Vulnerable children, 03.07.20; JF/770 - INQ000546810: Paper on Winter Preparedness; JF/771 - INQ000546811: Cabinet Office C-19 PMO Paper on Delivery planning - guidance for SROs & teams, 03.07.20

<sup>702</sup> JF/772 - INQ000546541: DfE Draft Winter Preparedness Plan for Vulnerable Children; JF/758 - INQ000546540: Cabinet Office, C-19 Delivery Plan Feedback

<sup>703</sup> For example, JF/773 - INQ000546821: Email, VC Plan Latest and Data Dashboard 08.10.20; JF/774 - INQ000546548: DfE Winter Preparedness Plan for Vulnerable Children v.3.0

<sup>704</sup> JF/775 - INQ000546833: Agenda, VCYP Programme Board, 11.11.20

<sup>705</sup> JF/776 - INQ000546834: VCYP Programme Dashboard, 11.11.20

<sup>706</sup> JF/777 - INQ000546835: VCYP Programme Board Paper on lockdown exemptions 11.11.20

<sup>707</sup> JF/778 - INQ000546828: Readout and Actions, VCYP Programme Board, 11.11.20

<sup>708</sup> JF/779 - INQ000546831: Email, VCYP & CSC deep dive commission, 13.11.20

<sup>709</sup> JF/780 - INQ000546827: Cast list and CO Questions for VCYP/CSC Deep dive, 27.11.20

extended SitRep and paper from DfE addressing safeguarding, school attendance and wider issues.<sup>710</sup> By way of actions, the CTF was to focus on the rise in Elective Home Education as part of ongoing discussions about attendance, on special schools and SEND in mainstream education, and to convene further meetings with OGDs to discuss the role of the third sector and youth services, data collection and the cross-government multi-agency safeguarding approach.<sup>711</sup>

- 10.29. In early December 2020, DfE established a VCYP Steering Group to review, discuss and agree actions on the government's delivery priority for VCYP.<sup>712</sup> CTF officials attended meetings of the Steering Group which took place between December 2020 and July 2021.

#### Temporary legislation

- 10.30. The Inquiry has asked about the Cabinet Office's involvement in the development of and amendments to regulations relating to the social care and protection of children during the pandemic.<sup>713</sup>
- 10.31. Regulations were necessarily reviewed and amended as the pandemic progressed to ensure that they were still fit for purpose. In the case of child social care and protection, such reviews were an important way of ensuring that flexibilities made through amendments to regulations continued to be proportionate and were helping the sector to continue to provide support for vulnerable children despite, for example, increases in demand and impacts caused by staff absences.
- 10.32. DfE led the drafting of regulations and any amendments, as well as the process for public consultation. The role of the Cabinet Office, as with all regulations during the pandemic response, can broadly be summarised as follows:
- 10.32.1. The CTF, specifically the Regulations team, supported DfE to translate the strategic and policy intent agreed by the Prime Minister or by other ministers through Cabinet Committees accurately into regulations. This involved working closely with DfE and the Government Legal Department which were responsible for drafting and making any amendments to regulations (and for preparing any

---

<sup>710</sup> JF/781 - INQ000546825: Deep Dive VCYP/CSC, 27.11.20; JF/782 - INQ000546826: VCYP Programme Extended SitRep 26.11.20

<sup>711</sup> JF/783 - INQ000546824: Actions, VCYP/CSC Deep Dive 27.11.20

<sup>712</sup> JF/784 - INQ000546822: Email, VCYP Covid steering group; JF/785 - INQ000546633: VCYP Covid Steering Group Terms of Reference November 2020

<sup>713</sup> Relevant regulations and amendments include: the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020; the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2020; and the Childcare (Childminder Agencies) (Registration, Inspection and Supply and Disclosure of Information) and Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) (Children's Homes etc.) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2021.

related public consultations) to ensure that ministerial steers were accurately reflected in regulation drafting. The CTF team also provided advice to ministers on the legislative implications of different policy options and on how certain measures could be implemented (e.g. through public guidance or legislation).

10.32.2. Where required, the Cabinet Secretariat facilitated collective decision-making in relation to regulations concerning children and young people through Cabinet and its committees, either as part of committee meetings or through 'write round'.<sup>714</sup>

10.33. The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 came into force on 24 April 2020. They covered matters such as residential care, local authorities, private fostering, care planning, fostering and adoption and Ofsted. They were implemented so that social care services could continue to be provided to vulnerable children, in the context of the broader response to the pandemic.

10.34. As the regulations' owner, DfE was responsible for assessing and monitoring the impact of amendments to children's social care regulations on vulnerable children and would be better placed to detail the work undertaken in this regard. The Cabinet Office's role in assessing the impact of the pandemic on children and young people more broadly is set out in Section 11.

#### Temporary guidance

10.35. The Inquiry has asked about the Cabinet Office's involvement in developing 'COVID-19: Guidance for Children's Social Care Services',<sup>715</sup> first published by DfE on 3 April 2020. Over the course of the pandemic, changes in the epidemiology of COVID-19 and the arrival of new and more transmissible variants meant that this guidance was necessarily updated multiple times.

10.36. Updates to the guidance were drafted by DfE, with support provided by the CTF to ensure accuracy and consistency with regulations and other wider guidance on, for example, testing, isolation and social distancing.<sup>716</sup> In this sense, the strategic approach reflected in DfE's 'Guidance for Children's Social Care Services' was based on the Government's overall strategic approach at the time, as developed by the Cabinet Office, with policy specific to children's social care and safeguarding set by DfE. Some issues, however, were entirely for DfE as the responsible department, such as the frequency and nature of Ofsted inspections of social care settings.

---

<sup>714</sup> JF/012 - INQ000182315: Cabinet Manual, page 36, para 4.44 - 4.48

<sup>715</sup> JF/786 - INQ000498860: Guidance, COVID-19: Guidance for Children's Social Care Services, 03.04.21

<sup>716</sup> JF/787 - INQ000546597: DfE and CTF email exchange, Children's Social Care Guidance v5, 24.09.20

- 10.37. The guidance initially covered principles and delivery of services as they were affected by the temporary regulations and covered topics including children's social care, alternative provision schools and providers, social care for disabled and young people, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, Residential Provision (including children's homes, residential schools registered as children's homes and foster care), unaccompanied asylum seeking children, care leavers, mental health of looked-after children, courts, fostering and adoption, the workforce and Ofsted. The guidance was updated by DfE on numerous occasions until it was eventually withdrawn in April 2022.
- 10.38. From June 2020, the Cabinet Office reviewed the children's social care guidance to ensure consistency with cross-government policy and strategy, for example:
- 10.38.1. In late August 2020, updating to account for changes in social distancing and shielding and to reflect that in September 2020, schools and colleges would reopen for all;<sup>717</sup>
- 10.38.2. In September 2020, updating to reflect the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2020 and legislation concerning the rule of six;<sup>718</sup>
- 10.38.3. In November 2020, updating to reflect the system of 'tiers' and changes as to respite care, short break services, restrictions on visitors / gatherings in residential settings and mental health of looked-after children and care leavers.<sup>719</sup>
- 10.38.4. In December 2020 and early January 2021, updating to reflect the national lockdown which started on 5 January 2021.<sup>720</sup>

#### Reviews and Lessons Learned

- 10.39. As outlined in this statement, the welfare and protection of children was a government priority throughout the pandemic. The Cabinet Office was focussed on improving data collection as well as monitoring and mitigating the risks and impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable children, including more specifically how children's social care was provided during that time.

---

<sup>717</sup> JF/788 - INQ000546593: Email, Children's Social Care Guidance and Extended Regulations, 25.08.20; JF/789 - INQ000546594: Final Draft of Guidance for children's social care services, 24.08.20

<sup>718</sup> JF/790 - INQ000546598: Email, Children's Social Care Guidance v5, 24.09.20; JF/791 - INQ000546599: Final Draft of Guidance for children's social care services.

<sup>719</sup> JF/792 - INQ000546537: Draft Children's Social Care Guidance v8; JF/793 - INQ000546576: Advance Copy of Children's Social Care Guidance v8

<sup>720</sup> JF/794 - INQ000546564: Updated Guidance for children's social care services, 31.12.20

- 10.40. In addition to this work, several independent reviews relating to children's social care were conducted.<sup>721</sup>
- 10.41. The Inquiry has asked about the Cabinet Office's involvement in children's social care policy prior to January 2020. From 2010, DfE introduced a number of children social care reforms however, by 2019, shifts in demographics, the emergence of threats to child safety including exploitation, and an ongoing need for local authorities to improve performance meant that further review was necessary.<sup>722</sup> In 2019, the Government committed to undertaking an independent review of the children's social care system. On 9 January 2020, No.10 officials provided advice to the Prime Minister which recognised increasing pressures and poor performance in the system and recommended action to progress an independent review.<sup>723</sup> The Prime Minister agreed that this work should be started, led by DfE and overseen by a credible external figure.<sup>724</sup>
- 10.42. The onset of the pandemic diverted focus onto addressing the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people, as detailed throughout this statement. As a result, progress on the Independent CSC Review was delayed until December 2020.
- 10.43. On 15 January 2021, the Government announced that Josh MacAlistair had been appointed by the Education Secretary to lead the Independent CSC Review, which would be co-sponsored by No.10.<sup>725</sup> It was commissioned to review the whole system and set out a series of recommendations to reform children's social care in England in order to improve the lives of England's most vulnerable children.<sup>726</sup> In March 2021, the Independent CSC Review began its work. The Terms of Reference, published by DfE, were wide and included a review of the ways in which children's safety could be improved.<sup>727</sup>
- 10.44. As outlined at paragraph 2.18, in January 2021 NERT(PS) was established to drive the development and delivery of plans to recover public service performance in light of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The NERT(PS) was chaired by CDL and the Committee aimed to use lessons learned from the pandemic response to drive wider reform.

---

<sup>721</sup> For instance JF/795 - INQ000347039: June 2020 Andrea Leadsom review requested by the Prime Minister, which focused on the improvement of early years.

<sup>722</sup> JF/796 - INQ000546795: Final Report - 'The Munro Review of Child Protection', May 2011

<sup>723</sup> JF/009 - INQ000546739: Note to Prime Minister on Children's Social Care, 09.01.20

<sup>724</sup> JF/797 - INQ000546724: Email, Children's Social Care, 14.01.20

<sup>725</sup> JF/798 - INQ000546780: Press Release, Education Secretary launches review of children's social care, 15.01.21

<sup>726</sup> JF/799 - INQ000546612: Note on Independent Review of Children's Social Care

<sup>727</sup> JF/800 - INQ000588303: Terms of reference for the Independent Review of Children's Social Care

- 10.45. In April 2021, Josh MacAlistair met with CDL following which, CDL was kept abreast of developments relating to the Independent CSC Review.<sup>728</sup> Given the potential overlap with the NERT(PS) phase two vulnerable children work stream, the work of the Independent CSC Review was discussed as part of the development of the NERT(PS) phase two priorities, with a view to avoiding a duplication of effort.<sup>729</sup>
- 10.46. The Independent CSC Review comprised four phases and consulted with thousands of people with personal and professional experience of children's social care. From March to June 2021 a public consultation<sup>730</sup> took place which concluded with the publication of the 'Case for Change' Report which 'which set out [the] problem diagnosis and brought to bear some of the evidence and experience...heard' during the consultations.<sup>731</sup> From June to November 2021 a round of public engagement which included evidence gathering, visits to stakeholders, written feedback, a roadshow of events, and collaboration with sector groups and experts took place. This phase concluded with the review's second report, 'Paying the Price', which outlined the cost of social care and adverse outcomes. From November to February 2022 a public 'Call for Ideas' was launched, and time was spent consolidating and reflecting on the views heard during the preceding nine months and potential recommendations. Further engagement took place, including visits to secure settings, as well as speaking to mothers that had given birth in prison. The final report, including recommendations, was published in May 2022.<sup>732</sup>

*The national review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson*

- 10.47. The Inquiry has asked about the Cabinet Office's involvement in the response to the national review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson (or any other such reviews), and to the findings made in Arthur's case about the impact of changes made to child protection practice owing to COVID-19.
- 10.48. Following the criminal trials and convictions in the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson in December 2021, the government committed to the establishment of a national review into their tragic deaths.<sup>733</sup> This review commenced soon after and was carried out by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, chaired by Annie Hudson (the 'Hudson Review'). The Hudson Review was principally established to 'evaluate how

<sup>728</sup> JF/801 - INQ000546672; JF/802 - INQ000546673: Emails - 'DfE Independent Children's Social Care Review', 07 May 2021 and 13 May 2021

<sup>729</sup> JF/803 - INQ000546740: Draft Cabinet Office Paper, Annex B Phase 2 Evidence Base; JF/804 - INQ000546674: Note from Alice Miles on NERT(PS) Phase 2 Priorities 31.03.21;

<sup>730</sup> JF/805 - INQ000546752: Webpage, Independent Review of children's social care, 23.05.22

<sup>731</sup> JF/806 - INQ000546793: The Case for Change, Independent Review of Children's Social Care;

<sup>732</sup> JF/807 - INQ000541057: Final Report, The independent review of children's social care, May 2022

<sup>733</sup> JF/808 - INQ000546749: Press release, Government action following murder of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, 05.12.21

agencies acted to safeguard Arthur and Star and what factors enabled or limited their ability to protect them from the profound and ultimately fatal abuse and neglect that he suffered'.<sup>734</sup> As part of its work, the Review sought to understand, as far as possible, whether the circumstances of the global pandemic affected Arthur and Star, their families and the response of professionals to what was happening in their lives.<sup>735</sup>

- 10.49. The national learning from the Hudson Review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson was made available to the MacAlistair Review of children's social care, and informed its report and recommendations.
- 10.50. On 8 December 2021, the Prime Minister announced the Government would enact its Plan B in response to the spread of the Omicron variant across the UK.<sup>736</sup> Around the same time, DfE published updated Schools Guidance which was cleared by the Cabinet Office prior to its publication.<sup>737</sup> In response to the tragic deaths of Arthur and Star, this updated Guidance included additional guidance on vulnerable children which set out the need for schools to implement robust systems of contact where vulnerable children and children believed to be experiencing challenging circumstances at home were self-isolating, and therefore not attending school.<sup>738</sup>
- 10.51. Following the Hudson and MacAlistair reports, the 'Stable Homes, Built on Love: strategy and consultation' was published in February 2023.<sup>739</sup> Commitments included support for family networks, a new national framework, updated safeguarding guidance, a data strategy to transform data in children's social care, and £8.5 million of additional funding to support fostering. DfE led on the implementation of the reforms in 2023.

---

<sup>734</sup> JF/809 - INQ000546771: Terms of Reference: National review into the deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson

<sup>735</sup> JF/810 - INQ000541052: Review, Child Protection in England - National review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson

<sup>736</sup> JF/811 - INQ000086632: Press release, Prime Minister confirms move to Plan B in England, 08.12.21

<sup>737</sup> JF/812 - INQ000546600: Email, Educational guidance - Plan B update for clearance, 08.12.21

<sup>738</sup> JF/813 - INQ000546601: Schools COVID-19 Operational Guidance December 2021

<sup>739</sup> JF/814 - INQ000541058 Stable Homes, Built on Love: strategy and consultation - [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/642460653d885d000fdade73/Children\\_s\\_social\\_care\\_stable\\_homes\\_consultation\\_February\\_2023.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/642460653d885d000fdade73/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf);

JF/815 - INQ000546743: DfE Policy Paper, Children's social care: reform statement, 15.12.23

## **11. EQUALITIES WORK AND WORK SINCE THE PANDEMIC ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

### Summary

- 11.1. Throughout the pandemic, understanding and mitigating the impact of COVID-19 upon children and young people remained a priority across government, as is clear from the chronology provided throughout this statement. This section provides some summary points on equalities work not covered in the statement so far, and points to relevant work that has been undertaken since the pandemic.
- 11.2. Given the structures in place during the pandemic, a number of departments were working to address inequalities in relation to children and young people, in line with their policy responsibilities. In most cases, the relevant department was DfE. The Cabinet Office supported DfE and other government departments to assess and where possible mitigate impacts on children and young people. This included coordinating cross-cutting work, analytical work by the CTF (which included dedicated teams focused on education and disproportionately impacted groups) and the Equality Hub, and steers from No.10.
- 11.3. The Minister for Equalities, the Rt Hon Kemi Badenoch MP, was closely involved with the work of the Equality Hub, including in relation to children and young people. Individual government departments were and remain responsible for understanding the equality impacts of their policies through compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED).

### Work to assess the equalities impact of the pandemic on children and young people

- 11.4. From the early stages of the pandemic, the Cabinet Office supported and produced work to consider impacts, especially disproportionate impacts, of COVID-19. In the early period, this work was led by the Equality Hub and Government Equalities Office (GEO), situated within the Cabinet Office. Given the centrality of children and young people to discussions on COVID-19 policy, discussion of the impacts on children and young people also took place in Ministerial forums and with No.10 as detailed throughout.
- 11.4.1. Work to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on disabled children often formed part of the work on disability more generally, with in-depth policy discussions taking place through 'stocktakes' or 'deepdives' - for example the COVID-O on 8 December 2020 focused on the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on disabled people, acknowledging that disabled children and their families had reduced access to services and support. This prompted exemptions in isolation rules which assisted families of disabled children, educational provision in special schools and financial

support for low-income families supporting disabled children. A GPSMIG meeting on 21 May 2020 also considered the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people, including the data on children and young people. An outcome of this meeting was the prioritisation of disabled children for devices and connectivity.

11.4.2. The impacts of the pandemic on children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) were included under broader policy provisions for vulnerable children and young people. Data on SEND children and special schools was monitored through the SitReps reviewed at Education Gold meetings. Where policy issues were identified the CTF worked with departments to coordinate the policy response, bring policy issues to the attention of ministers,<sup>740</sup> and align any new guidance with the broader strategic approach to the pandemic. The CTF engaged with DfE on ensuring that provisions had been made for SEND children and young people and support them on deliverability. Examples of this include coordination around the testing policy for special schools with DfE and DHSC and then aligning and clearing guidance<sup>741</sup>, and work to ensure that SEND children could continue to access therapies and respite care<sup>742</sup>. During an analysis of transmission in educational settings, in the Return-to-Schools Gold meeting on 14 October 2020 DfE highlighted work with PHE and NHS England to address the needs of vulnerable children receiving medical treatment and confirmed that laptops were being procured to support those who were shielding. From November 2020 cross-government work was coordinated through DfE's VC&YP Programme Board<sup>743</sup>, which regularly reviewed the ongoing response and recovery against a series of milestones<sup>744</sup>, for example the SEND recovery plan<sup>745</sup> in June 2021.

11.5. GEO coordinated cross-government reviews of the social distancing measures (including isolation policies) introduced to ensure departments were fulfilling PSED requirements. GEO collated assessments from different departments to produce a single assessment document to support a review by ministers. The first of these assessments was included in a Cabinet Secretariat paper for a COBR meeting on 16 April 2020.<sup>746</sup> GEO coordinated PSED assessments to inform ministerial reviews every three weeks of social distancing measures until August 2020.<sup>747</sup> The reviews covered a wide range of topics, including the impacts on

<sup>740</sup> JF/816 - INQ000622812: Email Covid-O disability item - SEND kids 25.11.20

<sup>741</sup> JF/817 - INQ000622800: Email DfE schools guidance, EY, SEND and HE 01.07.20

<sup>742</sup> JF/818 - INQ000622813: Email sector guidance on SEND 23.11.20; JF/819 - INQ000622814 Guidance for full opening: special schools and other specialist settings - November 20

<sup>743</sup> JF/820 - INQ000622805: SEND COVID recovery plan 24.06.21

<sup>744</sup> JF/821 - INQ000622804: VCYP wk4 Programme review 24.06.21

<sup>745</sup> JF/822 - INQ000622803: Programme board minutes and actions 24.06.21

<sup>746</sup> JF/823 - INQ000083934: Paper - 'Equality analysis of social distancing measures' (Cabinet Office) 15.04.20

<sup>747</sup> Between April and August 2020, 3 regulation reviews and 2 proposed easement analyses were conducted, coordinated by GEO. First review: 15.04.20 [JF/823 - INQ000083934], Second review: 12.05.20 [JF/824 -

children and young people, especially impacts of NPIs. For instance, the first review included a detailed assessment of the impact of school closures - especially on vulnerable and SEND children - as well as the risk of disproportionate impacts on children and young people from closures of sports and leisure facilities, libraries and community centres. The reports also considered intersectional impacts, such as those on young LGBT people isolated in homes with families not supportive of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

- 11.6. Alongside coordinating the reviews of social distancing measures, GEO supported officials responsible for PSED in other government departments, including through the Cross-Government PSED Network which was used to share knowledge and expertise. GEO ran a session on 9 June 2020<sup>748</sup> for the PSED Network and helped to advise departments on how to carry out effective impact assessments in emergency response situations.<sup>749</sup> GEO shared guidance with departments, and with the CTF once established, on how to factor equalities considerations into policy making.<sup>750</sup>
- 11.7. The progress of the Government's work to address disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 was also monitored, and its findings published, as part of four Quarterly Equality Reports. This work responded to a review by PHE in June 2020 into 'Disparities in the risks and outcomes of COVID-19'<sup>751</sup> following which the Prime Minister and Health Secretary asked the Minister for Equalities to lead cross-government work to address the findings. As young people were, in general, less likely to suffer severe symptoms of COVID-19, the Quarterly Reports did not focus heavily on children and young people. There were, however, a number of recommendations made in relation to children and young people, including recommendations to improve ethnic minority access to healthcare, schools, early years services and children's social services,<sup>752</sup> as well as specific recommendations to encourage young people, ethnic minorities and parents of young children<sup>753</sup> - shown to be more hesitant about getting vaccinated - to take up the offer of vaccination. The Fourth Report<sup>754</sup> also commended the success of the community champions programme, noting that the programme had successfully supported young adults to become community champions

---

INQ000083943], Third review: 08.06.20 [JF/825 - INQ000083944], Analysis of easements: July 2020 [JF/826 - INQ000083867], Analysis of easements: August 2020 [JF/827 - INQ000083868].

<sup>748</sup> JF/828 - INQ000083886: Agenda, Cross-government PSED network meeting, 09.06.20

<sup>749</sup> JF/829 - INQ000083887: Slidepack, 'PSED network meeting, 9 June 2020' (GEO) 03.06.20

<sup>750</sup> JF/830 - INQ000083914: Slidepack, 'How to think about groups with protected characteristics during Covid-19', 22.06.20

<sup>751</sup> JF/831 - INQ000089740: Paper - 'Disparities in the risk and outcomes of Covid-19' (PHE) August 2020

<sup>752</sup> JF/832 - INQ000089742: 'First quarterly report on progress to address Covid-19 health inequalities', 22 October 2020

<sup>753</sup> JF/833 - INQ000089746: 'Third quarterly report on progress to address Covid-19 health inequalities', 25.05.21, updated 03.09.21

<sup>754</sup> JF/834 - INQ000089747: 'Final report on progress to address Covid-19 health inequalities', December 2021

through a model of shared decision-making, and of messaging encouraging young people to get vaccinated.

*Cabinet Office work since the pandemic to support children and young people*

- 11.8. The Equality Hub performed lessons learnt processes in relation to inequalities and disproportionately impacted groups in the period during and directly after the pandemic. Although not specific to children and young people, relevant lessons nonetheless resulted from this work. For instance, following a Disability Unit lessons learnt process in August and September 2021, the Unit took forward an action to explore how departments could best support disabled children and their families as a future priority workstream.
- 11.9. The UK Government Resilience Framework - published by the Cabinet Office in December 2022 (and updated in December 2023) - outlines ways to tailor risk communications and the sharing of information on risk.<sup>755</sup> The Framework drew on lessons learned from the COVID-19 response, aiming to provide a cross-government framework for understanding, preventing, managing and responding to risks. The updated Resilience Framework continues to draw on specialist advice for managing specific risks, including DfE's "Emergency planning and response for education, childcare and children's social care settings". The framework sets out how educational and childcare settings should plan for and deal with emergencies, with the aim of minimising the amount and length of any disruption to education or childcare. This guidance complements existing safeguarding policy and health and safety law, providing guidance on: making emergency plans and procedures (including an example template); building local resilience partnerships and involving stakeholders in planning; remote education; and signposts further guidance on the prioritisation of vulnerable children and young people, safeguarding and wellbeing and mental health support.

---

<sup>755</sup> JF/835 - INQ000097685: The UK Government Resilience Framework, December 2022

### Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.

Signed:

**Personal Data**

Dated: 06 August 2025