

SESSION FOURTEEN OF THE ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP
Pandemic Response and Recover
Monday 24 April 2023, 5.30pm, Room B, 1 Parliament Street

MINUTES

In Attendance: Esther McVey MP (Chair), Sir Iain Duncan Smith MP, Philip Davies MP, Lord Strathcarron, Lord Ashcombe.

Apologies: Graham Stringer MP (Co-Chair), Sir Graham Brady MP, Miriam Cates MP, Henry Smith MP, Greg Smith MP, Chris Green MP, Rt Hon Sammy Wilson MP, Dawn Butler MP, Ian Paisley MP, Paul Girvan MP, Baroness Foster of Oxtou, Earl of Leicester, Lord Moylan, Lord Robathan, Baroness Fox of Buckley, Baroness Noakes, Baroness Morrissey.

1. The Chair welcomed the APPG members to the meeting to discuss severe and persistent school absences due to lockdowns and school closures and the issue of ghost children.
2. The Chair introduced the speakers, in turn:

Alice Wilcock, Head of Education for the Centre for Social Justice and lead author of the Lost and Not Found report, began by clarifying the term ghost children as severely absent children who were spending more time out of school than in it, though some have legitimately moved into home education. Giving context, Ms Wilcock explained while it was an issue pre-pandemic, since schools reopened absence increased term on term with severe absence levels reaching 140,000 children of all ages and persistent absence (children who are missing 10% or more of school) rising from about 900,000 pre-pandemic to about 1.7m.

Ms Wilcock said that understanding why children did not return when the school routine returned was key as severe absence indicates a serious underlying problem, though it is known that the longer a child is out of school, the harder it is to get back into that routine. Citing the most recent study of severe absence from the Centre for Social Justice, a major driver was poor mental health and needs not being met by schools. Other underlying causes included domestic violence, children who had taken on work and the increase in home-schooling to 115,000 children. Ms Wilcock concluded that lockdowns and school closures has broken the social contract between families, parents and schools, with absence across the board increasing and becoming entrenched and though the government is trying to trial some elements of support it does not address the scale of the problem.

Anne Longfield, former Children's Commissioner for England, began by making the point that there was no process of oversight or advice sought from agencies like the Children's Commissioner, when it came to closing schools and while they were kept open for vulnerable children, the reality was attendance was low, around 2%, likely because the narrative said stay at home and parents did not want to put their children in danger. Something that the Essential Infrastructure Bill addressed.

Ms Longfield also highlighted the issue of chronic anxiety with children not leaving their homes, with statistics such as one in six children of all ages and one in four girls over 13

having a probable mental health disorder. Ms Longfield also talked about the increase in extreme incidents of behaviour that are now being seen in school resulting in an uptick in exclusions and the worry that it will lead to gang membership. Anecdotal evidence was cited for younger gang membership, 13 or 14, in “managerial” roles and high risk activities. She added that regulations around social care were lessened starting in May 2020 so social workers were not seeing these children face-to-face.

Molly Kingsley, children’s campaigner and Executive Founder of UsForThem, spoke about feedback from their 50,000 members that the school system failed children for the last 3 years and continues to do so, echoing other speakers that it is important to look at the underlying causes not just the solutions, particularly of the serious mental health issues exacerbated by the pandemic. Citing work by Jonathan Haidt into the cause of children’s worsening mental health issues, as bad as the impact of the pandemic was, his findings place the root cause with smartphone penetration reaching over 50% in the UK and the US in 2012.

Ms Kingsley went on to talk about ways to make children happy in school and the aspirational ideas for recovery that were talked about in 2021 and how extra curricular activities, and not just a focus on academia, feed into attainment, productivity and GDP. Agreeing with other speakers that the attendance figures are indicative of a more general malaise across the school system following three very disruptive years and a lack of budget, she concluded that more holistic investment in education is needed, such as the structural changes proposed by the Essential Infrastructure Bill, which would make closures subject to a parliamentary vote and give the Children’s Commissioner a veto right as well as strengthening that role or even having a senior cabinet member for children.

Chris Jones, Director for Strategy and Engagement, Ofsted, agreed that the school system is under huge strain, in terms of recruiting and retaining teachers, strikes, funding issues, but that absence is the biggest issue. Mr Jones highlighted that some multi-academy trusts are doing some really good work, putting as much money as they can into family support. Mr Jones also cited Jonathan Haidt’s research and agreed that his arguments about social media being the root cause of a lot of anxiety and mental health issues are persuasive, particularly for teenage girls, which lockdowns exacerbated as well as a rise in online gaming cited.

Adding to the previous comments about anxiety among previously high-achieving children, he agreed that exam pressure and missed learning are both causes, as well as picking up on the points made about the social contract and cited a tenfold increase in the numbers of term time holidays, though still small, that have been approved. He concluded by outlining some of the work Ofsted is doing to restore best practice and to support what the government is putting in place.

3. The Chair opened the meeting up to Members’ questions. There was much discussion including the huge disparity in remote learning, understanding the underlying causes at both ends of the spectrum, that absence tends to be a symptom of something else that’s going wrong. Other wide ranging topics discussed were home schooling, decisions based around fear with no thought about the consequences, worsening behaviour at school and the decline in the importance to parents of continual education since lockdown and school

closures and parents' outrage at being fined for taking children out of school for a holiday with school now seen as optional by many, which led onto discussion about the extent of the dissatisfaction with the school system.

4. The Chair thanked all who attended and confirmed the date of the next meeting, 5pm, Monday 15 May 2023 and brought the meeting to a close.