

13:32:00

**The Secretary of State for Education
(Gavin Williamson)**

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on restrictions that will be lifted for schools, early years, childcare, colleges and universities when we move to Step 4, which is currently anticipated to be on 19 July. The Prime Minister has announced that at Step 4 we will be able to remove swathes of restrictions on daily life and that, after 16 months of sacrifice by people across society, we will return ever closer to normality.

We have faced down, together, an historic public health emergency, and we all owe a great debt of gratitude to pupils, parents and teachers, who gave up so much as we took action to save lives. However, I highlight to everyone that Step 4 does not mean the end of the pandemic. Some restrictions will be kept in place as we move towards more of the population being fully vaccinated. Although the pandemic is not over, we are moving into a new phase of managing Covid, from strict rules towards ever greater personal responsibility.

When I came to this place last week, I again set out my priority to put the interests of children first. We know from our own experience and evidence that children are better off in classrooms with their friends and teachers. Since 8 March, millions of children and young people have been back in the classroom learning with their friends and teachers. That is hugely valuable for their wellbeing as well as for their education.

I also made it clear that I do not think it is acceptable that children should face greater restrictions, over and above those of wider society, especially since they have given up so much to keep older generations safe during the pandemic. Therefore, having balanced the risks, I am pleased to tell Members across the House that key restrictions on education and childcare will come to an end as we move to Step 4.

Although keeping children in consistent groups was essential to control the spread of the virus when our population was less vaccinated, we recognise that the system of bubbles and isolation is causing disruption to many children's education. That is why we will be ending bubbles and transferring contact tracing to the NHS Test and Trace system for early years settings, schools and colleges.

Where there are outbreaks, schools and colleges may be contacted by NHS Test and Trace and they will also work with local health teams as they do now. We are also setting out new rules that mean that, from 16 August, children will need to isolate only if they have tested positive for Covid-19. I am also pleased to be able to say that there will be no restrictions on in-person teaching and learning in universities, unless students are advised to isolate or impacted by local outbreaks.

From Step 4, a more proportionate set of controls will apply in early years, schools, colleges and higher education institutions. These will maintain a baseline of protective measures in education settings while maximising attendance and minimising disruption to children and young people's education. In addition to ending bubbles, it will not be necessary to stagger start and finish times. Schools and colleges may, of course, continue with those measures until the end of the summer term if they so wish.

My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary outlined earlier today that we can ease restrictions on the self-isolation rules for close contacts of someone who has tested positive for Covid-19. In education settings, all other existing measures, including guidance on isolation of contacts, will stay in place until the end of this term, in line with isolation rules for the rest of the population as more adults are vaccinated. Settings will continue to have a role in working with health protection teams in the case of a local outbreak. Where necessary, some measures may need to be reintroduced.

From 16 August, those under the age of 18 will no longer be required to self-isolate if they are contacted by NHS Test and Trace as a close contact of a positive Covid-19 case. That will balance the need to keep children safe with allowing them to get the education that they deserve and need. Instead, children will be contacted by Test and Trace, informed they have been in close contact with a positive case and advised to take a PCR test. Eighteen-year-olds will be treated in the same way as children until four months after their 18th birthday to allow them to have the opportunity to get fully vaccinated.

Having listened to teachers, and balancing the risks to health and education to maximise attendance and minimise disruption to children and young people's education, some protective measures, including enhanced hygiene and ventilation, will remain in place for the autumn term. From Step 4, face coverings will no longer be advised for pupils, students, staff and visitors either in classrooms or in communal areas and social distancing will no longer be necessary.

As I mentioned earlier, testing programmes remain important as we move cautiously out of restrictions. With that in mind, secondary schools and colleges will be asked to provide two on-site tests to their students at the start of term, with regular home testing continuing until the end of September, when that will be reviewed. It is vital that secondary school and college students continue to test for the last few weeks of this term and throughout September. Education settings still operating over the summer will continue to test twice a week, with asymptomatic test kits still available to families over the summer break as well.

I want to encourage all teachers, educational staff and eligible students to get their vaccines. It is incredibly important for all staff to get the second dose of a vaccine as soon as they are eligible, so that they secure the strongest possible protection against Covid-19. In line with wider changes to isolation from 16 August, if in close contact with someone who has tested positive, fully vaccinated teachers will be able to remain in the classroom from the autumn term.

My Department has just set out more detail and published new guidance for arrangements in education settings from Step 4, covering both the summer period and the following term, when children will return to school. I want to take this opportunity to assure Members that headteachers in their constituencies can contact the Department for Education if they have any questions about the new guidance that we have published.

No Government would want to restrict people's freedom in the way we have had to do since the spread of Covid-19. We have prioritised education since the start of this pandemic. We made sure that schools and colleges were the last to close but the first to open. We kept school and college places open to vulnerable children and those of key workers throughout the pandemic, and procured millions of laptops and tablets for children to learn at home. None of this could have been achieved without the incredible work of our inspirational teachers and wider educational staff, and I thank parents and students, who have shown patience and flexibility over the last 18 months.

I know that many colleagues will agree that today, as a nation, we prize the role of schools, colleges and universities more than ever before. With the ending of these restrictions, children and young people will be able to get on with their education and lives while we continue to manage this pandemic. I commend this statement to the House.

13:42:00

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)
(Shadow Secretary of State for Education)

I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for advance sight of it. I echo his tribute to the education staff, pupils and parents who have done so much over the past 15 months to keep children and young people learning.

Just over an hour ago, the Department for Education confirmed that, last week, 623,000 pupils were not in school because of coronavirus. Although 471,000 of those pupils were out of class because of a bubble collapsing, there were still over 150,000 who were not in the classroom with confirmed or suspected cases of coronavirus, or because of potential contact with a case outside the classroom. It is not just bubbles that have driven pupils from the classroom; it is the Conservatives' negligence in letting the Delta variant take hold at the same time as they fail to support schools with the necessary precautions.

I have always said that school is the best place for children—for their learning, wellbeing and development—which is why we must do everything we can to keep them there safely. Many parents will be relieved to hear that the chaotic bubbles policy is coming to an end, but the Secretary of State has not given us confidence that his alternative will keep more children in school without driving up infections. His Department has piloted using testing instead of the bubble system, but he did not mention that in his statement. Can he tell us the results of the pilots using daily testing in some schools? Did it mean more hours in the classroom? Did it mean more cases? Did it mean an unmanageable workload for school leaders? Can he confirm how many schools pulled out of the pilots and whether the reasons for schools' withdrawal are informing his Department's planning for next year?

The Secretary of State said that bubbles will end when we reach stage 4 but there will be no on-site testing until September, so what support is he putting in place to keep pupils in the classroom for the remainder of this term? He said that bubbles need to end in order to support summer schools. Can he confirm that they will have mitigations in place in addition to testing, so that children can learn and not just isolate over summer? Separate from summer schools, his Department has promised a holiday activities and food programme. Can he tell me what measures will be in place to ensure that this programme can run so that children do not miss out on the opportunities it offers?

The Secretary of State spoke of a baseline of protective measures when schools return in September. Can he say more about what they are? He mentioned better ventilation. Will all schools receive support from his Department to put that in place? Specifically on masks, can he explain why masks were required in schools in March and April but are not required now, when case numbers are much higher? Will he publish the scientific evidence that I am sure he has received to underpin his decision? If he cannot do that, will he reconsider it?

We know that the vaccination programme delivered by the NHS remains our route out of the pandemic, but we still do not know whether the vaccine will be available to children. When does the Secretary of State expect to receive that advice, and when will he make it public? If the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation does propose vaccinating older children, can he guarantee that the infrastructure will be in place to begin that process before the return to the classroom in September? As we look ahead to the new academic year, can he guarantee that schools, staff and pupils will know his plans for assessments next year by 1 September at the latest?

The Secretary of State mentioned on-site testing in colleges, but what other measures will be in place? Have they been supported to implement better ventilation, for example? I am sure students will welcome the return of in-person teaching and learning in higher education, but can he say what protective measures will be in place in these settings? What steps will be taken to support the return and safe learning of international students?

I want nothing more than for children to be in class, learning and spending time with their friends and teachers, and it is right for their learning that we move away from the chaotic bubbles system, but we cannot simply wish away the real challenges of the pandemic. Today's statement offers no clarity on how the Government will stop infections spiralling. The Conservatives' inadequate testing regime, lack of action on ventilation and recklessness at the border have put our children's education at risk. This must not continue.

Gavin Williamson

The hon. Lady touches on a number of areas. With regard to universities, we of course always support universities with international students, but we are also supporting them to get back to face-to-face teaching and to welcome youngsters back into the lecture theatre, which I know is part of the university experience that so many students have dearly missed.

The hon. Lady seems to have missed what is probably the biggest thing that has changed over the past few months. I appreciate that she is probably wedded to the European Union vaccine programme, and probably feels a sense of disappointment that this country decided to go out on its own and procure our vaccines, but the biggest difference is that in this country we have seen over 80 million vaccines already delivered into people's arms, giving them more protection. There is so much more protection today than we had back in March and April of this year, as this incredibly successful programme, led by the Prime Minister, has had a real impact in saving lives, keeping hospitalisation down and ensuring that we can take these important steps back to normality, and that adults and, most importantly, children can get on with their lives.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con)

I strongly welcome the Government's announcement today, and I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. We need to keep our children in schools, not out of them. We know that Covid-related absence in secondary schools was 10.4% on 1 July, up from 6.2% on 24 June. Other analysis suggests that year 10 pupils due to sit GCSEs next summer have missed, on average, one in four days of face-to-face teaching this year. What assessment have the Government made of the impact on children not at school in exam years, and what remedial action will they take to ensure that those children who have missed so much school have a level playing field for next year's exams?

Gavin Williamson

My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue that is, of course, a concern to teachers and parents, but most of all to pupils who will be looking towards 2022 and assessment and the awarding of grades. It is our intention to move back to an exam system, but we recognise that we must ensure that mitigations are in place for pupils taking that assessment in the next academic year. We will look at sharing more information about what those mitigations are before the summer, and we will update his Education Committee and the House accordingly.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab)

Many young people are extremely worried about next year's exams. One young constituent recently told me:

"I have never felt less confident in my ability to take part in next year's exams—if there even is that opportunity—and I'm sure many others are also struggling. I ask for 2022 GCSE exams to be simpler, easier and adapted to our lack of necessary education, out of compassion."

What does the Minister say to them? When will schools get certainty about changes to next year's exams and assessments?

Gavin Williamson

The hon. Lady might not have heard my answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). We are looking at giving further guidance and information to schools imminently, and we are very much looking at putting in place mitigation measures there, while recognising that the best form of assessment is always examination.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)

I thank the Secretary of State for putting children first. In the last year, the education of children has been trashed. Although every death of a child is tragic, we have to understand that there are 12.7 million children in this country and, sadly, every year 6,000 die. Can we have a sense of proportion? Will the Secretary of State reassure parents that the chances of any child falling seriously ill from Covid are “vanishingly small” and there is no risk to children from what he has announced today?

Gavin Williamson

My right hon. Friend is right to point out, as Professor Chris Whitty has done so many times, that children have very few adverse effects from Covid, if they are unfortunate enough to get it. That is why, combined with the vaccination programme that we are rolling out right across the country, we think it is right to take this next cautious but important step forward, in the light of the scientific, medical and health evidence.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)

Today's announcement about the scrapping of bubbles and self-isolation for pupils will be welcome news to many parents, pupils and teachers across the country. The Secretary of State made passing reference to the importance of ventilation. We know now about the importance of ventilation because it is an airborne virus. Therefore, what more is he doing to support schools to put better ventilation in place? Yesterday I visited Richmond upon Thames School in my constituency, which has spent £15,000 alone on improving ventilation. Many schools simply cannot do that, as they are already struggling to balance the books. What more support will he put in place, following the example of Germany and New York City?

Gavin Williamson

At every stage during the pandemic we have provided support for schools to put in place the measures needed to restrict the transmission of Covid and ensure that they can open. We recognise that good hand sanitising and good hygiene, along with ventilation, are important. We continue to offer schools advice on how best to deliver that.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con)

Digital inclusion is a huge issue for people across Rother Valley. However, both the Government and local businesses such as AESSEAL have stepped in to eliminate that barrier. AESSEAL has provided computers for over 1,500 households across Rotherham, and the Government have provided 1.3 million laptops and tablets to disadvantaged students across the country during the pandemic. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that pupils will continue to benefit from this record investment in IT equipment?

Gavin Williamson

My hon. Friend highlights not only the amazing work done through the Government's distribution of laptops right across the country, but the wonderful work of local businesses such as AESSEAL, which has gone out of its way to support its community, help children and make a real difference. That shows how communities have come together to support the elderly and our children. It is a great testament. I very much hope that the investment that AESSEAL and the Government have made in laptops and education technology will have a long and lasting legacy of bettering people's education not only in his constituency but in every one of our constituencies.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab)

May I press the Secretary of State on the question of exams, which other right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned? My constituent Ian, who is a teacher, points out that every time there has been a change to the exam system in order to cope with the pandemic over the past couple of years, it has been made at the last minute, with very little time for schools and pupils to prepare. If the Secretary of State is considering changes to the exam system, will he have an open consultation with school leaders and teachers, and will he get the plans in place as early as possible, so that there is not the sense of teachers being dumped on at the last minute?

Gavin Williamson

I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that we talk continually to school leaders, teachers and many in the education sector on these issues. I can assure him that, as I have mentioned a couple of times in answer to questions today, we will be sharing further information on assessment in the next academic year.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con)

I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the return to normality and stability with the contingencies and safeguards he set out. Does he agree that although people sometimes talk about a balance between education and health objectives, actually overwhelmingly they go together because being in school is so important for children's mental and physical health? Indeed, for some children there is also a safety protective factor.

Gavin Williamson

My right hon. Friend is exactly right. The greatest single act to support children's mental health was welcoming them back into schools on 8 March. That was the single biggest act that anyone could have done to help every single child. [Interruption.] Opposition Members are shaking their heads. They would probably like a situation where schools remained empty and children just remained at home. We on the Government Benches recognise that the beneficial effects of education and children's welfare are delivered by children being in school.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)

I know that the Secretary of State is familiar with Hull and knows about the educational challenges we faced in the city before Covid. I just want to press him on whether he really believes that less than one hour of tutoring a fortnight over the next school year is really enough to make up for the 115 days of in-school teaching that children in Hull have missed this year.

Gavin Williamson

The right hon. Lady is right to say that I know Hull very well, as my family come from Hull. I recognise that schools have faced great challenges, not just in the great city of Kingston upon Hull but right across the country. That is why our support for schools is not just about tutoring. She will be aware that there is so much evidence showing that small-group tutoring delivers some of the best educational catch-up and results of any intervention, in terms of money invested. Covid recovery support premium has gone out to schools, so they are able to build on further actions and interventions that they themselves can take to support children to catch up on the work they have missed.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con)

I also welcome the statement and thank my right hon. Friend. I thank everyone—the families and the staff—who has worked so hard to ensure that education has been delivered to children over the course of the pandemic. However, will my right hon. Friend clarify a point around the self-isolation requirements? As every parent knows, children—especially very young children—have coughs and colds and temperatures two a penny. At the moment, a temperature leads to a family self-isolation requirement, causing huge disruption to the child’s educational development and a huge impact on families. Can he unpack a bit what the requirements will be around children developing coughs and colds, particularly in early years, and what guidance and protocols will be taken forward? Will isolation be necessary, will testing be necessary, or can it be passed over if it is just a simple cough or cold?

Gavin Williamson

We would always encourage people, if they are poorly or ill, to remain at home in order to be able to get better. But for clarity, those who have been in contact with someone who has had Covid will still be able to access education and be able to come in to school, but if they have had that contact, Test and Trace would then be in touch with them and advise them to take a PCR test. But that individual is able to continue to attend school during that time, unless of course they are demonstrating symptoms of Covid—we would always advise people to self-isolate if that is the case—or have had a positive PCR test. Those reasons apart, they would be able to attend school.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)

The Secretary of State has told us that there will be a spike in infections following the relaxing of restrictions, and currently there are 150,000 school pupils with suspected Covid-19 that are out of school, so we know that that figure will go up. So this is not about children dying of the infection; it is about schools being a vector for infection. What is the Secretary of State going to do when the winter months are coming, and we have increasing numbers of infections, to ensure that that does not happen, by improving ventilation and assisting schools with the resources that they need to deliver a safer environment?

Gavin Williamson

I do not wish to contradict the hon. Gentleman, but schools have not been vectors of transmission; they have been reflective of the wider rates of Covid in the community. That is why we continue to have measures in place, including the

testing that will be in place for schools as they return after the summer period; and the continued twice-weekly testing that will run through September for children of secondary age, those tests to be taken at home.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

We now go by video link, or rather audio link, to Mark Harper.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)

When schools return in September, every adult will have had the chance to be—
[Inaudible.]

Madam Deputy Speaker

We will try to come back to the right hon. Member as soon as we can.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op)

As the data show, in York infection rates are soaring, particularly in school-age children, people are poorly, and as a result we are seeing major disruption in young people's education. So as we see infection rates soar across the country, it means that education will be further disrupted, and I hope that the Secretary of State recognises that. How would he ensure that effective testing is put in place, working with our public health teams on the ground locally, to mitigate against that spike in infections and ensure that young people and their families are supported when they have to isolate and miss school?

Gavin Williamson

It is absolutely right that schools have, and should continue to have, close and strong working relationships with local public health teams, not just in York, but right across the country. We have emphasised that point as part of the guidance that we have issued and made available to schools, because we recognise that we still have more to do. Work to defeat this virus will continue past the summer and into the winter.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con)

I welcome today's announcements. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the easing of restrictions will not affect his plans to provide high-quality tutoring alongside normal education in schools?

Gavin Williamson

I can absolutely reassure my hon. Friend that that is the case. High-quality tutoring, with the roll-out of the national tutoring programme that will have a

positive impact on so many, is one of the absolute top priorities of this Government. It is the single thing that can probably have the biggest impact on helping children to catch up on lost learning. That is why we are making such a substantial investment in it.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)

What are the Government doing to prevent the chaos of last year by ensuring that all higher education students can receive both vaccinations before moving around the country to their university? How will the Secretary of State ensure that those turning 18 late in this academic year are offered both vaccinations before they move to university?

Gavin Williamson

The hon. Lady raises an important point. That is why we are so pleased that we have been able to say to all those who are 18 and above that they have access to a vaccination. We are working very closely with the university sector to really get the message through about how important it is for youngsters—students—to be out there getting their vaccine: it protects not only them, but their friends, their family and their community.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)

Having called for it in last week's debate, I warmly welcome the Education Secretary's statement today about pricking the school bubbles and self-isolation system with effect from 19 July. Will my right hon. Friend confirm the timing? Is it entirely up to the schools themselves whether they implement any or all of these measures in the last week of term? What will happen during the summer schools? How does the timing of the measures combine with his statement that children need to self-isolate only if they test positive after 16 August?

Gavin Williamson

My hon. Friend asks and then it is delivered for him, so that goes to show his power. We are leaving it to the discretion of schools for the final few days of term. We are not expecting bubble systems to be operating during summer schools, including the holiday activities and food programme. This will be purely a test and trace approach, as is currently taken with the whole adult population. As we move to 16 August, that will be the moment we move to a system of children not having to self-isolate, as they will be able just to go for a PCR test and get the confirmation that they do not have Covid. If they do have Covid, they will, sadly but understandably, have to isolate.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab)

Schoolchildren have had a pretty miserable year and Covid is a pretty miserable disease. It does not recognise the inequalities in society and it disproportionately affects some of the poorest, most disadvantaged communities—the same communities that often need extra resource and help to get that educational attainment. What more is the Secretary of State doing to tackle that inequality, which was there before Covid—it will still be there after it and will be exacerbated by it—to ensure that those children have the best start in life? They are our country's future. What more can we do to help them to catch up and excel?

Gavin Williamson

The hon. Member and I share the same passion to deliver that sort of change and opportunity for so many children. It should never matter where they grew up or what their personal circumstances are; the ability of every child in this country to access the world's best education and the very best opportunities drives us on both sides of the House.

We have talked about the investment we are making to support children and help them to catch up, but we must not lose sight of the fact that in the drive to raise standards of education and ensure that knowledge-rich curriculum, we are pushing every child, no matter their background, to their absolute maximum, so that they can excel and have the opportunities that all of us want for our own children, and that we want for the nation's children. That is where the focus will be. As we cast our eyes to the year ahead, we look forward to spelling out a longer plan for how we will deliver that education, ensuring that we deliver not only for the hon. Gentleman's constituents, but for all our constituents, regardless of their background.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con)

I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I understand that testing will continue in secondary schools until the end of September, and at that point it will be reviewed. Will he update the House on what criteria we will consider at the end of September? I do not think any of us want testing in schools in perpetuity.

Gavin Williamson

None of us wish to have testing in schools in perpetuity, but as the Prime Minister has set out at every stage, we are taking a cautious, gradual approach to ensure that as we are able to lift restrictions, we do not get to a position of having to reimpose them. We feel that this prudent and sensible step needs to be taken. If there are concerns and a continued need to have testing in schools, we would of

course consider doing that. Most importantly, for all of us, is to ensure that schools remain open and pupils are in them.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)

A couple of weeks ago I was at the Bendrigg Trust outdoor education centre in my constituency, and it was a massive joy to see residential activities slowly starting again, with young people getting the benefits of outdoor education. It is a reminder of two things. First, 6,000 of the 15,000 people who worked in outdoor education at the beginning of the pandemic have now lost their jobs, and because of a lack of a specific bespoke package to support those centres, many have closed and many more are on the cusp of closing. Secondly, our outdoor education specialists in Cumbria and around the country have a unique set of skills that we need to deploy at this very moment, to encourage young people to re-engage with learning, and reignite a love of learning. What will the right hon. Gentleman do specifically to commission outdoor education centres to do that, out in mainstream schools, and will he meet me and some outdoor education specialists so that we can explain how that could be done?

Gavin Williamson

It is as if the hon. Gentleman's constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) and the hon. Gentleman think incredibly alike—perhaps not on absolutely everything, but certainly on this issue. My hon. Friend met me just last week, and we spoke about that exact matter. The best thing we can do to help those outdoor centres is ensure that their doors can open to welcome not just day visitors, but those who want to stay there on a residential basis. We will continue to look at what other measures we can introduce to support the sector. I know the value and enrichment that comes from doing so many activities, whether on Lake Windermere or in many other excellent locations around the country, and it brings real benefit. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues.

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

I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and the four schools in Stoke-on-Trent North, including Goldenhill Primary Academy, have received condition improvement funding. Rather than flogging the dead horse of exams, which I was going to do, I will jump to a different issue. Let us take 10% of pupil premium funding and ensure that it goes into high quality, extra-curricular enrichment activities, as laid out by me previously in the House, and by the Challenger Trust, which does excellent work in Gateshead. Let us ensure that we

give those disadvantaged pupils the access to high-quality enrichment activities that many enjoy, such as those in the school that I attended, the private school Princethorpe College.

Gavin Williamson

My hon. Friend is a man who likes to chew off a Secretary of State's ear, especially when it comes to condition improvement funding for his schools. It is great to see four schools benefiting from his assiduous lobbying, making sure that he is delivering for his constituency.

My hon. Friend raises an important point about the use of pupil premium funding. We want to see schools considering how it can be more effectively targeted, especially at pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those who need extra support. In the past, far too often, pupil premium funding has been seen as just another stream of funding going into schools. We need schools to consider how pupil premium funding is delivering for the pupils it is targeted at.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab)

Can the Secretary of State explain how children will access free school meals if they have to isolate away from holiday activities and food programmes during the summer? Does he agree with me that a cash transfer system, enabling parents to get the supplies that are right for their children, would ensure that better support reaches all those who need it?

Gavin Williamson

The hon. Gentleman raises a valuable point, and it is why the extra support provided by the Department for Work and Pensions, through local authorities, to ensure children are fed through the summer is such an important part of our holiday activity and food programme, which will of course be delivering not just food for so many students but activities that are just as valuable.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

In the hope that communications have improved in the Forest of Dean, we will try to go back to Mark Harper.

Mr Harper

I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. When schools return in September, every adult will have had the chance to be vaccinated at least once, which provides the bulk of protection, so why is regular testing still going to continue, perhaps

forever? Last week, the Secretary of State said he wanted to see it end. What has changed?

Gavin Williamson

Not only do we get my right hon. Friend's voice, but we get his picture on the screen too, so it was enhanced in every possible way.

Of course, we want to see schools return to as much of normal as possible as quickly as possible, but we have always taken the view that we need to take a cautious and careful approach, because we want things to be in a place where we do not have to take a step backwards. We have one of the most successful testing programmes that has ever been run in this country, and it was delivered in schools from the week commencing 8 March. We have seen it play an important role in containing and dealing with Covid and, most importantly, ensuring we keep schools open and welcoming to pupils.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con)

While all these huge issues are going on, the largest teaching union in the country, the National Education Union, has said there is an "urgent" need to "decolonise" the curriculum and how classroom layouts, in fact, represent colonialism. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is probably a more urgent need for the largest teaching union in the country finally to focus on the urgent need for kids to catch up on their learning, and for it to work constructively with the Government, perhaps for the first time, to try to ease these remaining restrictions?

Gavin Williamson

My hon. Friend is a new Member, and he arrives here with a lot of optimism. I reassure him that we have a broad, balanced and knowledge-rich curriculum of which we should be proud, although we always work to make sure it gets even better.

It is with some sadness that I say the National Education Union started off by saying it did not want teachers to teach pupils in person, and then said it did not want teachers to teach students online. It starts to make me question whether the National Education Union really believes in education at all. We will wait and see, and hopefully it will be more co-operative and hard-working in the next academic year.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)

Regular testing for pupils and staff is going to be a vital part of stopping the spread of Covid-19, but the decline in testing numbers shows that home testing is currently not working well. Tackling this with on-site testing would mean some schools in my constituency having to test 600 children a day, which they tell me they simply do not have the resources to do. Will the Secretary of State give schools the resources they need, including external support if they need it, to make sure they are able to carry out testing and keep children safe?

Gavin Williamson

I would like to reassure the hon. Lady that we will be supporting schools as they roll out the testing. Schools have delivered asymptomatic testing on school premises incredibly successfully already in this academic year and we will look at providing the same level of support to them as we did earlier on, in March. We have every confidence that we will be able to deliver that right across the country.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con)

I welcome these changes, which will mean that healthy pupils can spend more time in the classroom. Following my recent visit to Ashwicken Church of England Primary School, may I urge my right hon. Friend to ensure that, as part of the recovery plan and with an eye to the spending review, schools get the special educational needs funding that is required now more than ever, so that every child's needs are met?

Gavin Williamson

I know that my hon. Friend is a great champion for not only the schools in his constituency, but children with special educational needs—we all have a shared passion to do more for them. He is tempting me into public discussions with Her Majesty's Treasury over the Dispatch Box and straight to the Chancellor. Although I am tempted and he is desperately trying to lure me down that path, I will decline on this occasion to enter that public discourse. But of course children with special educational needs are a top priority for us, and I would certainly expect that to be properly reflected in any future settlements.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)

I welcome the end of mandatory bubble isolation, which has caused such disruption to parents, teachers and children, but the impact of Covid continues and the poorest are hardest hit. Over the past five years, child poverty in my constituency has risen by 13 percentage points, to 45%, which is six times the national average increase. So what additional support can children in my

constituency expect, apart from the catch-up plan, which the Government's own educational recovery commissioner described as "feeble"?

Gavin Williamson

One thing we can do to best help all children across the country is keep up the continued drive to raise standards across our schools. The hon. Lady dismisses the more than £3 billion of investment that we have made, but it is important investment, targeted at the interventions that will deliver the biggest benefit to her constituents.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con)

Last Monday, I made clear my view, and that of many in my constituency, about the unfairness of the bubble system and the consequential isolation, so I welcome today's confirmation. However, is it not the case that sending the whole bubble home because of one positive case is no more necessary now than outdoor sports days being cancelled or held behind closed doors, or end-of-term events being ruined? These are things we never get back. How can the Secretary of State and his team help colleagues across all educational settings feel supported to get the balance right come the new term?

Gavin Williamson

My hon. Friend hits upon the issue of sports days. Let us be absolutely clear: the guidance is there in black and white saying that sports days can proceed, and parents should be able to attend. We encourage schools to be able to do this because, as he rightly points out, these are things people cannot get back. That is why we wanted to be able to lift those restrictions at the earliest possible moment. I know that he is familiar with his regional schools commissioner, and if there are challenges, having local dialogue with the regional schools commissioner's team plays an important part, as they can deal with the school directly.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab)

Early years providers and nurseries—such as the fantastic Grasmere nursery in Luton North, which I had the pleasure of visiting recently—are a vital part of our education system. Although primary and secondary schools have been compensated for some of their Covid costs, nurseries have not had a single penny of the costs incurred during the pandemic reimbursed. Why are nurseries always an afterthought for this Government? Will this unfairness be rectified? If not, why not?

Gavin Williamson

I am sure that Grasmere nursery is reflective of the many nurseries right across the country that had the benefit of being funded at pre-Covid levels. We carried on that level of funding in recognition of the fact that they were operating in truly exceptional times.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con)

I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the step back to normality and letting children be children that the scrapping of the bubbles system brings, but there continues to be an anxiety that affects people on both sides of the debate, which is whether the vaccination programme will be extended to those under 18 years of age. Will my right hon. Friend redouble his efforts to work with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to push the JCVI to come forward with its recommendations so that, one way or the other, a decision can be made that takes that additional anxiety away from young people?

Gavin Williamson

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of ensuring that we have the correct and best information to inform decisions on the vaccination of children. It is my hope that the JCVI report will be imminently forthcoming, and that will obviously inform the decisions that the Government make in the best interests of all our children.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab)

For many months now, school leaders have been spending a lot of their time on weekends making contacts when they are notified that someone has Covid-19, so I am glad that some of that responsibility will be shifted to NHS Test and Trace, but will the Secretary of State clarify exactly what the relationship will be, given the references in the guidance to settings still having a role to play in that situation?

Gavin Williamson

Of course. The hon. Lady is right to highlight the amazing and important role that schools, headteachers and our whole education team have played in supporting the efforts on test and trace. We expect the contacting to shift from schools having to do it to Test and Trace doing it, but of course contact information will sometimes still be asked of schools. We see the current burden that schools face being scaled back considerably, very much to the benefit of headteachers and teachers.