

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

## SCHOOL ATTENDANCE (DUTIES OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND PROPRIETORS OF SCHOOLS) BILL

*Wednesday 1 May 2024*

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CLAUSES 1 to 3 agreed to.  
Bill to be reported, without amendment.

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**Sunday 5 May 2024**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chair:* MARTIN VICKERS

† Butler, Rob (*Aylesbury*) (Con)  
Carter, Andy (*Warrington South*) (Con)  
Charalambous, Bambos (*Enfield, Southgate*) (Lab)  
† Clarke, Theo (*Stafford*) (Con)  
De Cordova, Marsha (*Battersea*) (Lab)  
† Drummond, Mrs Flick (*Meon Valley*) (Con)  
Duffield, Rosie (*Canterbury*) (Lab)  
Firth, Anna (*Southend West*) (Con)  
† Ford, Vicky (*Chelmsford*) (Con)  
† Gideon, Jo (*Stoke-on-Trent Central*) (Con)  
† Hinds, Damian (*Minister for Schools*)

Hopkins, Rachel (*Luton South*) (Lab)  
† McKinnell, Catherine (*Newcastle upon Tyne North*)  
(Lab)  
Shannon, Jim (*Strangford*) (DUP)  
† Timpson, Edward (*Eddisbury*) (Con)  
† Walker, Mr Robin (*Worcester*) (Con)  
Webbe, Claudia (*Leicester East*) (Ind)

Bethan Harding, *Committee Clerk*

† **attended the Committee**

## Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 1 May 2024

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

### School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill

10 am

**The Chair:** Before we begin, I have a few preliminary reminders for the Committee. Please switch all electronic devices to silent. No food or drink is permitted during the sitting, except for the water provided. Would colleagues please forward speaking notes to [hansardnotes@parliament.uk](mailto:hansardnotes@parliament.uk)? My selection and grouping for today's sitting is available online and in the room. No amendments have been tabled, and we will have a single debate on all clauses in the Bill.

#### Clause 1

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE: GENERAL DUTIES ON LOCAL AUTHORITIES

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to consider clauses 2 and 3 stand part.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for serving on the Committee. Before going into the detail of the Bill, I will say some thank yous. I thank the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire, for his tireless support and for coming to Chelmsford to visit The Boswells School and hear directly from staff and students. I also thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North for ensuring that there is cross-party support for the Bill. At a time when politicians always seem to be arguing with each other, it is great to know that there is actually unanimous support when it comes to looking after our children and ensuring that they go to school.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester and members of the Select Committee on Education, as well as the Children's Commissioner, school heads, children's and mental health charities and local authority attendance teams, all of whom gave their views, shared their expert experience and supported the measures in the Bill. I also thank the officials in the Department for Education, Anne-Marie Griffiths in the Public Bill Office, and the Clerk, Bethan Harding, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris)—what would Fridays be without Rebecca?—for all the support I have received up to this point. I also thank Sarah from my office. Today is a busy day in politics, so a huge thank you to all MPs for taking the time and trouble to be here today. Every one of them is here because they care about children.

I will not repeat everything that I said on Second Reading, but I will repeat this: education is key to a child's future, and for most children school is the best place to be. This is a subject close to my heart, because I want every child to be able to achieve their potential. I want young people to have opportunities. I want them to be able to choose what they do in their future and to have a wide range of choices about whether to continue studying after school and if so, what to study. I want them to have a choice about what jobs or careers they go into.

However, attending school regularly is crucial in giving children those choices. Our children can achieve brilliant things: educational standards have come on in leaps and bounds over the past decade, with children now ranking 11th in the world for maths and 13th for reading. We should be so very proud of our nation's young people. That is phenomenal progress and we must not let it slip. However, the pandemic has significantly disrupted school attendance levels not just here, but in many countries across the world, with more than one in five pupils in England still missing out on the equivalent of half a day or more of lessons a week. That means that more than 1 million pupils are missing out on significant amounts of their education. It reduces their chances of getting good grades, limits the choices available to them for their future and risks impacting on their longer-term life chances. It also affects their friendships and their chance to take part in enrichment activities, which are so important to their wider wellbeing.

A great deal of work has been done to improve school attendance already. There was the in-depth consultation by the Department for Education, which led to detailed guidance on school attendance being published two years ago, in May 2022. Since presenting the Bill, the Government have already published an updated version of the guidance, which in particular sets out more detail on mental health support and meeting special educational needs. Since Second Reading, the Minister has announced that the guidance will become statutory from 19 August, and I thank him for doing so. Making the guidance statutory is supported by the Children's Commissioner and the Centre for Social Justice, as well as the Education Committee and many other experts. However, this legislation is still needed, and I welcome the Government's and Opposition's support for the Bill. It is a simple but crucial piece of legislation—just two main clauses.

The first clause will place a general duty on local authorities to exercise their functions with a view to promoting regular attendance and reducing absence in their areas. That will help reduce unfairness in the amount of support available for families between areas of the country and level up standards in areas with poorer attendance by providing a consistent approach to support. Local authorities should follow a "support first" approach.

The second clause will help to ensure that schools play their part by requiring them to have a detailed attendance policy. They will be required to publicise that policy so that all parents, pupils and those who work at the school are well aware of its contents. Legally that is achieved by inserting two clauses into the Education Act 1996. Both clauses will require all schools and local authorities to have regard to the guidance issued by the Secretary of State.

Local authorities will need to provide all schools with a named point of contact to support queries and advice, meet each school termly to discuss cases where multi-agency support is needed, and work with other agencies to provide support where it is needed in cases of persistent or severe absence. Schools will need to have a named attendance champion and robust day-to-day processes for recording, monitoring and following up on absences. They will need to use their attendance data to follow up with pupils who are persistently and severely absent.

**Mr Robin Walker** (Worcester) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for taking forward this Bill. As she knows, the Select Committee on Education has long recommended action in this space. Was she as struck as I was by the evidence given yesterday to the Select Committee by Annie Hudson, the chair of the child safeguarding review panel, about the proportion of the cases that she deals with—the most serious cases of things going wrong for children—where children are persistently or severely absent?

**Vicky Ford:** As ever, my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee makes an excellent point. Attending school is really important for safeguarding; we hear that again and again. Children who do not attend school are unfortunately much more likely to get drawn into gangs and much more likely to be victims of violence. Attendance has an important protective factor.

Importantly, students and their families will be aware of a school's attendance policy before they choose their secondary school. Because children often have that choice about which secondary school they go to, they will know what the school expects of them in respect of turning up.

In addressing the issue of school attendance, however, it is really important that we do not simply lay the blame at the door of hard-working parents. The vast majority of parents want their children to do well, but many do not have the help that they need to support their children in fulfilling those aspirations. Some children face specific barriers to school attendance, such as issues with transport or ensuring that a child's special educational needs are met. That is why the guidance places a great deal of emphasis on early help and multidisciplinary support.

Schools and local authorities will need to work together. Local authorities will need to help schools to remove those barriers to attendance.

**Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): I join colleagues in congratulating my right hon. Friend on bringing the Bill to this stage and hopefully on to the statute book with cross-party support. It is a key part of making sure that we bear down on what we know is a key indicator of when children not only fall out of school, but potentially get excluded. That is when we know lots of trouble can start to escalate for them in their lives. So, will she join me in trying to persuade schools and local authorities to embrace the Bill when it gets on the statute book in a way that really does start to reduce the need for exclusion, particularly for the very vulnerable children who might fall out of school and education altogether?

**Vicky Ford:** I thank my hon. and learned Friend for making such an excellent point. This might be the last time I get to thank him for all the work he has done for

children during his time in this place, which will be worse off without voices like his championing children. We must make sure that we continue to have champions for children in this place. He makes a really good point about severe and persistent absences, but actually, really small absences can make a difference. The Boswells School, which I visited with the Minister, had looked at the difference between children who had attended between 95% and 100% of the time and children who had attended between 90% and 95% of the time. Those two cohorts were identical in all respects—special educational needs and disabilities, free school meals, and so on. Of the children who had attended 95% to 100% of the time, 82% got the five good GCSEs needed to progress. Of the children who had attended just a bit less—90% to 95% of the time—only 68% got those five good GCSEs plus maths and English. That really whacks their chances of going on to college, so I have written an open letter to all schools in my constituency, setting that out to parents so that they are aware that just that tiny drop in attendance can really affect their child's life chances.

To conclude, the School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill has the potential to go a long way in tackling the causes of absence from school and removing the barriers to school attendance that some children face. I hope that it will set an example that many other countries follow, and I hope that our nation's children can rely on all right hon. and hon. Members to support the Bill today.

**Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford on bringing forward this legislation. I was very pleased to speak in support of it on Second Reading, because quite simply, children cannot learn at school if they are not in school in the first place. I do not intend to detain the Committee long, but I would like to raise two points where I would welcome comments from the Minister and where it therefore might have been unfair to intervene on my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford.

First, placing a statutory duty on local authorities for this register, as the legislation would do, may result in their incurring some additional costs. As Members from across the House will know, local authority budgets are particularly squeezed now, so we need to be extremely careful about adding further burdens. I would welcome anything that my right hon. Friend the Minister can tell us about how he will ensure that authorities such as mine, Buckinghamshire Council, will be appropriately supported to be compliant with the proposed legislation.

Secondly, I heard what my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford said about parents, but I am concerned about the pressure being felt by some smaller schools to achieve high attendance in the face of what can be extremely unco-operative and challenging parents. In my constituency, I recently visited a primary school where the senior leadership felt they had no choice but physically to go and collect children from their homes and bring them to school, because the parents were simply refusing to do so. The teachers, the head and the governors were really quite distressed about the impact that that was having on the lives of the teachers doing it, but they were doing it because they were so worried about Ofsted perhaps marking them down if they could not achieve that attendance. I have raised the matter

[Rob Butler]

personally with Ofsted. It was very sympathetic to the points that I was raising and it is going to talk to the school directly.

However, the point remains that although the register in this legislation will allow us to record who is absent, we need parents to fulfil their responsibilities, so I should be grateful if the Minister would update the Committee on what steps his Department is taking to encourage that degree of parental responsibility, which is essential. It is not the duty of teachers, or of Government, to supplant parents in instilling the right discipline and the right approach to school in their children.

Overall, I am very happy to support the Bill promoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford. Having brought a Bill through the House myself, I know what hard work it is for an individual Member—not least in making sure that people come to Committee—so I warmly congratulate her on that and I look forward to seeing the Bill clear all of the further legislative process.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Chelmsford on bringing forward this private Member's Bill on such an important subject and on making sure that it got to Committee today. The poor attendance rates that we are seeing in schools are at a crisis point. It is something that we all agree must be addressed urgently—I would say by local authorities, schools, families and Government working together on the issue.

Clause 1 introduces a general duty on local authorities, clarifying their role in promoting regular attendance and reducing the number of absences. It is absolutely right that local authorities do all they can to promote attendance at school. I pay tribute to those already going the extra mile, whether in Newham or Northumberland. Clause 2 lays out some particulars that schools must follow in their attendance policies and provides guidance on how this should be issued and communicated to parents. These are welcome measures, and I hope they will have a positive impact on the current situation in our schools. I know we all agree that we cannot ensure that every child gets the best start in life if they are missing so much time in the classroom.

10.15 am

I do worry that this is just one small part of the solution. The Bill does not qualify the role of families or, more importantly, the Government. The Government say that school attendance is their No. 1 priority, yet in my local authority of Newcastle, the number of children missing half of their lessons has rocketed by 282% in the last six years. We must look at the reasons why some children cannot come to school every day. Almost half a million children are waiting for mental health treatment. Thousands of children with special educational needs or disabilities require more support. Children are struggling with inadequate speech and language skills following the pandemic. It is the role of Government to provide support to solve these issues. I hope that alongside this Bill, the Government will look in detail at how they can bring down waiting lists and provide more of the interventions needed.

Another measure that is proven to improve attendance and attainment is breakfast clubs. That is why Labour has committed to introducing free breakfast clubs in every primary school in England. We will fully fund that by cracking down on tax loopholes and avoidance. This is another tool that the Government could employ to ensure that the Bill has even greater impact.

To conclude, I thank Members for attending and for their contributions, which highlighted the issues and concerns we all share about school attendance. We can all agree that tinkering around the edges will not do; to ensure that the Bill has the greatest impact, we need to see action from the Government so that we do not see a whole generation missing from Britain's schools. With that, I welcome and commend the work of the right hon. Member for Chelmsford in highlighting the issue, bringing the Bill forward and lobbying so hard for the changes that schools and families are crying out for. I look forward to seeing the Bill pass through its remaining stages in the coming weeks and months.

**The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds):** It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. I want to join colleagues in congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford on introducing the Bill and her work in getting it to this stage. She brought to the process not only her commitment and passion but a number of unique insights. It was a pleasure to join her in visiting The Boswells School when I came to Chelmsford, and it has been a pleasure working with her on the Bill. This topic is clearly of the highest importance to her, as I know it is to Members of this Committee and to the Government.

It was clear on Second Reading that right across the House there is a shared recognition of the value of regular school attendance for attainment, wellbeing and development. Put simply, none of the other brilliant parts of school—whether that is phonics, maths mastery, two hours a week of sport, being with friends or taking part in the school play—can have a benefit if children are not there for them. This issue is of highest priority for us. I am pleased to see that the cross-House support continues to hold through Committee stage. I feel very confident in recommending the Bill to pass through its remaining stages. I take the opportunity to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley for her work in bringing forward the Children Not in School (Registers, Support and Orders) Bill, which is due for Committee stage in the coming weeks and which the Government also support.

The pandemic was one of the biggest challenges ever posed to the education system, both here and around the world. Among its knock-on effects is this unprecedented impact on absence.

Before the pandemic we had had long success in bringing down absence. It had been 6% at the time of the change in Government back in 2010, and it came down to 4.7% just before covid. Persistent absence came down from 16.3% to between 10% and 11% in the second half of the decade, until the onset of covid. Our goal is to build on the strengths of the existing system to improve attendance levels as quickly as possible back to pre-pandemic levels, and indeed better.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford reminded us, this issue is affecting different jurisdictions and education systems right around the western world

from Norway to New Zealand. In England, it is one of our top priorities, and I am pleased to be able to say that we are seeing a difference. Thanks to the brilliant efforts of our school leaders, teachers and other members of staff, 440,000 fewer pupils were persistently absent or not attending in the past academic year than in the previous one. We welcome that improvement, but there is still clearly further to go to get to pre-pandemic levels, and indeed to improve further on them. There are still parts of the country where families do not yet have access to the right support. As my right hon. Friend outlined, the Bill will improve the consistency of support available in all parts of England, giving parents increased clarity, and levelling up standards across all 24,000 schools and 153 local authorities. Ultimately, this is about their 9 million pupils.

The Bill contains two main clauses: the first will impose a general duty on local authorities to exercise their functions with a view to promoting attendance and reducing absence in their areas, and the second will require schools of all types to have and to publicise a school attendance policy.

**Mr Robin Walker:** Ministers have to think carefully about imposing new duties on schools, but is not the reality that the vast majority of schools already have an attendance policy? Schools publicising it, however—sharing it and making it public—will be useful in encouraging dialogue with parents, local authorities and all the other organisations that come forward. What the Bill does in calling for publicity for the attendance policies is vital.

**Damian Hinds:** All that my hon. Friend says is correct. All schools have some form of attendance policy. There is some variation, and one of the things that is happening through this process—the Bill, and our wider work with behaviour hubs and champions, and so on—is to spread best practice. There is real interest from schools in doing so, because they see some of the variation in attendance rates and want to be able to do everything possible. Publicising is part of that. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford said, when going into a secondary school, for example, families will know what the policy is, which itself can be a help in upholding those attendance policies.

**Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con):** The Bill is great, and I thank my right hon. Friend for it. Is there any evidence that breakfast clubs in primary schools increase attendance? I am slightly confused: if people do not send their children to school, will breakfast clubs make them get up to take their young children to school earlier?

**Damian Hinds:** I think there is. There is some evidence that facilitating things for parents can be helpful, particularly when such things allow parents to go to work and so on. Where I might disagree with the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North is that that is not unique to primary schools; in fact, attendance is more of a problem at secondary school than it is at primary school. We spend quite a lot of money at the moment on supporting breakfast clubs in a targeted way—where they are most needed, where they can make the most difference—and a blanket approach to primary schools would not achieve that. We think it is right to target the money and to take

a precise approach, recognising that absence is more of an issue in secondary schools. Through breakfast clubs and other things one might do, one can have more of an impact.

Both clauses will require all schools and local authorities to have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State in relation to school attendance when complying with their duties under the Bill. That guidance, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford said, is the piece entitled, “Working together to improve school attendance”. It is widely supported by schools, trusts and local authorities, and both the Select Committee—I am pleased to welcome its Chair here today—and the Children’s Commissioner for England have previously called for it to be made statutory.

The guidance, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford said, was published in May 2022 to allow schools and local authorities time to implement the expectations. As I said earlier, we have already started seeing an improvement in attendance rates since then. To support the sector in delivering those expectations we have implemented a comprehensive attendance strategy; colleagues will be familiar with important aspects of that. We will of course continue to provide support.

To give an outline of that package, we have offered expert attendance advice support to every local authority in the country and to a number of trusts. We have set up attendance hubs, where lead schools offer support to others to improve their attendance practice—now reaching around 2,000 schools, responsible for 1 million pupils. We have created a new attendance data tool to help identify children at risk of persistent absence and enable early intervention. We convened the attendance action alliance at a national level to bring together system leaders from every part of our society, the public sector and parts of the charitable sector that can have an effect on this important issue. We are piloting attendance mentors who offer one-to-one targeted support to persistently absent pupils; we have recently appointed Mr Rob Tarn to the role of national attendance ambassador; and we have laid regulations that will, from the summer, modernise school registers and introduce a national framework for penalty notices.

I want to respond briefly to points made by colleagues. I say gently to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North that I do not think she really wants to bring politics into this. The truth is that these issues are affecting countries right around the world. They are also affecting the home nations—the constituent countries of the United Kingdom. In Wales a different political party is in government and absence rates in Wales are worse than they are in England, but I recognise that, overall, we share the same ambitions.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North asked about the support available to families. She is quite right to identify the importance of things like mental health support. That is why we have offered the training grant to all state-funded schools; I think 15,000 have now taken up that offer to have a senior mental health lead trained. It is also why we are rolling out mental health support teams across the country. We anticipate getting to 50% of pupils being covered by that by the end of this financial year. Already there is greater prevalence in secondary schools than primary schools. We are also supporting the national school breakfast club programme because of the effects it can have.

[*Damian Hinds*]

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury made some very important points. First, I join him in paying tribute to the work of the teachers at the school that he mentioned. I have been blown away when visiting other schools around the country. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford and I have of course had our own visits, and have had the opportunity to see some of the amazingly dedicated work and the lengths that schools and individual members of staff will go to, to try and ensure that every child has the opportunity of a first-class education.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury is right: it is parents' responsibility to have children go to school. We have also been communicating with parents directly—I think that is important—making sure, for example, that people know about the NHS guidance on when it is necessary to keep a child off school and when it is not. I have already mentioned our support for breakfast clubs.

10.30 am

I will also mention the additional funding that we are putting into the Supporting Families programme. Colleagues may remember it from a previous time. It was called the Troubled Families programme when it first came in, but it is now called the Supporting Families programme. However, it has always been a central part of that programme that children have to be in school; that is one of the key outcomes from that programme. As it transfers into the Department for Education, I am sure that we can build further upon it.

In closing, let me reiterate my support and the Government's support for this Bill. As I said on Second Reading, and as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford has set out so clearly and effectively today, being in school has never been more valuable, with all the opportunities that it brings and with standards continuing to rise. This Bill—her Bill—will help to make sure that every young person and their family, whatever their background, wherever they are in the country, receives the support they need to do just that.

I thank you, Mr Vickers, for chairing today's session; I thank our Clerk, Ms Harding; I thank the brilliant team from *Hansard* for their ever-effective work and for decoding what we say, now and at other times; and I thank the officials from the Department for Education, and indeed the House authorities.

I also thank colleagues here in the Committee today. Of course I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Aylesbury and for Stafford, my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley, who is also my constituency neighbour, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central; my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury; and my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester. I know that the commitment of everybody here on this issue is reflected in their being here today to facilitate the passage of this Bill. It is going to be an important piece of legislation of which we can all be proud—in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford.

I commend the Bill to the Committee.

**Vicky Ford:** I would just say a massive “thank you” again to everybody who has come here today, and for the various comments that have been made. I was not going to say very much now, but maybe I can just take a couple of minutes to reflect on some of the comments and put on the record some of the other work that I have done, because it may give rise to some “next steps” thoughts.

I particularly thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North. She is right about special educational needs. In my county of Essex, it is taking far too long for parents to get their children's education, health and care plan, or ECHP. I am really glad that the county council has recruited extra staff; they are bringing in outside expertise to address that issue. And the Government have put considerably more money—60% more money, I believe £10.7 billion—into special educational needs.

The next steps that I would like to see include the building of more specialist hubs within mainstream schools, as particularly at primary school level I have seen those to be incredibly effective on both speech and language, and in children who may be on the neurodiversity spectrum, in helping children from many different primary schools—those who need such extra help—to get back into mainstream schooling, as well as the building of more specialist schools. So, some of the extra capital that the Government have given recently to go into those specialist hubs will make a real difference.

On the subject of mental health support, I agree that more children are saying that they have issues with their wellbeing. I have heard directly from schools that have said mental health support teams are useful.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North mentioned breakfast clubs. They can help some schools, but they will not necessarily help secondary schools, as the Minister said.

When I have spoken to schools about attendance, they have said that the issue of more children missing out on school seems to be particularly with girls in years 8, 9 and 10. If you read the survey on girls' attitudes by Girlguiding UK, which they have conducted every year for many years, you will see that there is deep concern about the happiness levels of young women in this country. The more I read that survey, the more I am convinced that part of this issue is to do with what is happening to girls online, including what they are seeing online; we have to do more. I am really glad, therefore, that the Department for Education has said that no children should have phones in school; phones should not be allowed in schools. I am concerned about how many schools are not following that suggestion. I also think that we need to go further.

Because I am addicted to private Members' Bills—[*Laughter.*—] I intend to introduce a new ten-minute rule Bill on the subject of children's phones. I recently met a head of child protection and loads of other experts, and they believe that the best way to protect children's phones is through the system operator. It is the iPhone Operating System and Android operators that can identify the age of the person who is using a phone from the way that they use that phone. They could easily put blockers on a child's phone to stop a child being able to send sexual images of themselves or access age-inappropriate content. That may be the way my Bill goes, but that is next month's work.



Many parents and schools talk to me about how the pandemic broke the contract between families and schools. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North mentioned the pandemic and the impact that it had on SEND provision. I was Minister for Children during the pandemic, and the challenges that we had in trying to keep schools open were huge. Many times, when all the evidence was that it was doing damage to our children, it was the unions that blocked the reopening of schools. I remember those conversations. I do not want to get into a political argument now—and the unions had important points about the safety of staff and so on—but I hope that if we ever go through a pandemic again, we will be able to work together to make sure that staff, parents and children are safe but that we minimise the loss to children. I am sure the hon. Lady will want to have a conversation with me afterwards about that.

**Catherine McKinnell:** I agree with a lot of what the right hon. Lady is saying, but I urge extreme caution on rewriting the history of the pandemic. It is really important that we take lessons from the inquiry and look at things in the round. As a parent at that time, I remember the difficulty that schools had staying open because of the level of covid among teaching staff. It is very dangerous to simplify it and blame one group of people. I think we all have lessons to learn from that very difficult national experience.

**Vicky Ford:** I remember living through the pandemic, and I agree that the inquiry is important. The hon.

Lady is right that at times there were high levels of sickness among teaching staff, but at other times there were not.

On the issue of holidays, I can completely understand the pressure on some families to take holidays outside the school holidays, because they can be cheaper, but—I gave the statistics earlier—even a small drop in a child’s attendance can really hit their life chances, and there are 13 weeks of school holidays during the year. One thing that I would like to look at more is time shifting some of the school holidays. I have spoken with schools in Essex about whether they would shift some of their holiday weeks so that they do not overlap so much with national holidays, to give parents that bit more flexibility. I understand that in Germany there are different school holiday times in different regions. That type of flexibility, with local authorities working with the schools in their area, both maintained and academies, to ask, “Can we have a bit of a localised approach to give parents that bit more flexibility to take holidays away from the main school holidays?”, may be part of a solution.

I thank everyone very much for this piece of work. It is an important first step, and it has been great to have cross-party support on it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 2 and 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Bill to be reported, without amendment.*

10.38 am

*Committee rose.*





