

## **All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility**

### ***The impact of the digital divide on social mobility***

**Tuesday 8 December 2020**

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility was pleased to host a meeting on the impact of the digital divide on social mobility with the following panellists:

- Siobhain McDonagh MP, MP for Mitcham and Morden
- Javed Khan, Chief Executive of Barnardo's
- Jane Girt, Headteacher of Carlton Bolling School

Chair of the APPG Justin Madders MP introduced the session and was joined by co-chairs Baroness Tyler of Enfield and David Johnston MP.

#### **INTRODUCTORY SPEECHES**

##### **Siobhain McDonagh MP**

Siobhain outlined the issues in her constituency which led her to champion this cause, including those who were living in cramped conditions throughout lockdown. Siobhain's community rallied together, but she asked, how is it right that educational opportunities for the most disadvantaged children were dependent on a postcode lottery of charitable giving?

Recent Teach First research found that 84% of schools with the poorest pupils still don't have enough devices. The digital divide manifests itself by giving the wealthiest another advantage. Before lockdown, children on Free School Meals were leaving school 18 months behind their classmates. During the period of school closures, a quarter of children eligible for Free School Meals did less than an hour of school work a day. This is not the fault of teachers, who have been working unbelievably hard.

Ofcom estimate that 1.78m children are without access to the internet. The government launched Oak National Academy, but no number of online lessons could benefit children without internet access. The law has now changed to require schools to provide remote learning, but the government hasn't ensured that this is possible. Many children live in a household with only a phone for internet connection. The poorest families have turned to Pay As You Go, which can cost up to £37 per day to stream online lessons.

With increasing numbers of self-isolating pupils, this is no longer a theoretical debate, but a practical issue facing schools now. Secondary school pupils are spending an average of 1 hour 37 minutes per week on online work, and every click of a mouse is widening the digital divide. Siobhain is introducing a bill in parliament to ensure internet and device access to all children eligible for Free School Meals. The bill has been backed by many influential figures across the sector.

##### **Javed Khan, Chief Executive of Barnardo's**

The issues facing young people and children have often been overlooked during Covid. Barnardo's has supported 359,000 vulnerable young people this year, the highest reach in the charity's history. The young people that Barnardo's support face huge, complex vulnerabilities, and things are getting tougher for them. Social mobility was stagnating before Covid, and the pandemic has intensified the challenges. More young people are at risk of being in poverty.

Not all of the children that Barnardo's work with are on Free School Meals. FSM is not the only indicator that should be used – there are many families that would be eligible that don't take it up, for example. The digital divide challenge is far broader than Free School Meals.

Vulnerable children and young people are the hidden victims of the pandemic. It is not just those who already had a social worker or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), but the tens of thousands of young people who have now been driven into poverty.

Many Barnardo's staff continue to work face-to-face on the frontline. 87% of services are now providing support digitally. For those with access to digital technology this has been a lifeline, and they are able to access therapy, help with applying for jobs and more. There is a clear divide between those who have access and those who don't, and the schools that have resources and those that don't. There is no doubt that digital poverty is widening the gap at school, and there is now a generation of vulnerable young people who are now less likely to do well in school, go on to university or get on the career ladder. 'Levelling up' appears harder to achieve than ever.

To address some of the issues arising from the pandemic, Barnardo's brought together partners to launch a programme funded by the Department for Education to find hidden victims. 40,000 young people have been supported through the programme, and it has been extended to the end of March. Barnardo's also launched the Great British Tech Appeal with Vodafone, encouraging people to hand in their old devices to be refurbished. Barnardo's distributed 1,500 of these devices to vulnerable children.

The pandemic has accelerated an existing trend towards digital. This isn't likely to go backwards, so it is important to start thinking about how to ensure digital services are accessible. Charities have a role to play in this, but they can't do it alone. There are three key steps that the government should take:

1. Work with charities and local authorities to identify which children are in digital poverty.
2. Announce a plan to close the gap within a clear timeframe. This needs to be a joint effort with tech companies, charities and local government, but the government has a clear leadership role to play here.
3. Invest in digital innovation by setting up a fund for charities to invest in digital innovation and solutions.

### **Jane Girt, Headteacher of Carlton Bolling School**

Jane's school in Bradford could not expect families to provide devices due to high levels of deprivation. The school has high levels of pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium and FSM, as well as pupils with English as an additional language. The literacy and numeracy starting points are well below average. Parental engagement is poor due to poor parental education, language barriers and lack of aspiration.

Lockdown was a challenging period. Student engagement on both the online and paper-based learning was poor. This was caused by lack of access to digital devices, lack of confidence in using the devices and a lack of routine and support from families. Some students were unable to access online learning due to having only 1 device per household. One student lived in a multi-generational household where the only available time to use the device was between 2am-5am.

Very little progress had been made by pupils during this time. Pupils were out of the habit of learning, and had lost the key skills of retention and recall of knowledge. Along with the recovery curriculum in place, the school is also having to re-teach pupils how to learn.

Most pupils in the school have access to a device, but some have indicated that they could not use it for schoolwork. Many also share their devices with 2 or more people at home. The school has continued to provide paper-based learning which mirrors the lessons happening in school, but these pupils are missing out on the daily feedback that is crucial, which is impacting on their progress and confidence.

In October, the school moved to live lessons and purchased webcams from the government's catch up premium. The school received 261 laptops as part of the government's scheme, but there were problems at every step. From the initial order in March, the school received far fewer laptops than pupils that matched the criteria. Some laptops arrived without Google licenses, meaning that extra time was needed before they were usable. The dongles provided didn't have enough data for use for the whole month after pupils had downloaded online lessons.

All students should be entitled to a device, not just one per household. Access to the internet is of paramount importance too. Vouchers could be provided to allow families to purchase subsidised technology. There is also a need for training and support for families in how to access online learning.

## Q&A SESSION

### *The role of government*

Baroness Tyler of Enfield thanked the panellists and offered her support to Siobhain on the bill. Baroness Tyler commented that the strategic response set out by Javed is really important, and suggested that the APPG might do some more work on this and what a plan to tackle the digital divide might include. She said that businesses should be doing more, but that the state should also be doing more. We wouldn't expect disadvantaged pupils to provide their own textbooks and source materials. She asked the panellists what they believe the state should be doing.

Siobhain briefly mentioned that her bill was used primarily as a device to bring a range of people together to gain attention to the issue. She said that charitable and business giving is important, but it shouldn't be a postcode lottery, and tackling these issues needs to be a priority of government. The range of responses that schools have been able to give is differs hugely. In one school in the borough, every single pupil receives a tablet when they start school. During lockdown they were able to deliver 6 online lessons a day and contacted parents if pupils hadn't signed on.

Javed said that business is an important route, and we are seeing business conscience growing with some big employers giving back their furlough funds, for example. Industry is recognising that they have to do the right thing to maintain public support, and we should be seizing on this opportunity. However, ultimately the leadership must come from government. One way the government could do this is by using the £4bn levelling up fund to address digital poverty. The digital poverty challenge is a country-wide issue.

Jane agreed with Baroness Tyler that access to digital should be a basic entitlement for children alongside their basic rights to reading, writing and arithmetic.

### *Effectiveness of online learning*

David raised that digital provision cannot be a substitute for what can be provided face-to-face in schools or the workplace. He said there is a danger we may say that as long as disadvantaged pupils have the online tools, they will be fine. It is important to not lose sight of the soft skills that you cannot develop over a screen. He drew a parallel between this and the expansion of apprenticeships, when many employers decided that apprenticeships were the route for disadvantaged young people, rather than working on their graduate routes too.

Justin asked Jane if she had found any of the online teaching methods more effective than face-to-face. Jane said she hadn't, and that building relationships is so important. Live learning is the closest they've got to face-to-face, but nothing is as good as being in the classroom.

Siobhain raised that online learning can be used to develop specialist provision, rather than replacing teaching. She mentioned Khan Academy, an online education service across the developing world which is bringing learning to those who are unable to access face-to-face learning. Online provision has allowed people to catch up, develop specialist provision, and it is important for adult learning too.

Javed said we need to think about digital access in broader terms than just learning. The support that Barnardo's provides isn't formal learning but it is a key step in a vulnerable young person's life before they are able to learn. Barnardo's found that the young people that they previously had a relationship with found the switch-over to online far easier than those who came to Barnardo's during the pandemic and had not built up the trust face-to-face. There were benefits to the online move though, with some young people enjoying the flexibility.

#### *Additional challenges due to dyslexia*

A question was asked around the additional challenges faced by young people with dyslexia. Jane mentioned that there are various programmes available for dyslexic pupils, but there is vital pre-training needed to ensure that young people have the skills to use these programmes alone.

#### *Skills needed for remote learning*

It was raised that there is limited research on the skills needed to be an effective remote learner, and the panel were asked what more we can do to identify the skills needed.

Jane highlighted that her school has done some training, but it is an area that needs far more evidence. She mentioned that this is an area the EEF could do some work on.

Siobhain raised that the Sutton Trust could look at this to get some more information. She also suggested speaking to schools that are advanced in this and sharing good practice.

Javed highlighted that teachers spend a lot of time teaching pupils how to learn. Young people often know the technology but not how to use it for remote learning, and there is a need for investment in this area. There could potentially be something in the curriculum to help to teach the skills needed.

#### *Volunteers to come back to schools*

The panel were asked if they had considered the benefits of bringing in volunteers (for example retired teachers) to help deliver catch-up lessons.

Siobhain agreed that there would be benefits to having a call-to-arms and a sense of a national mission on this. She also mentioned the Teach First mentoring project and that she would like to know if this funding was still available.

Jane discussed the National Tutoring Programme and said that a key issue is that schools have to put a lot of work in prior to anyone external coming into the school. Teachers would have to put together information on what each pupil is missing in their learning and share these. In some cases it is easier for the schools to provide the catch-up themselves.

Javed asked if it might be better to do this through about lunchtime clubs or 1-1 mentoring, raising that it may be easier outside of formal lessons. Jane recognised the benefits of 1-1 mentoring and the ability to personalise the content and measure impact, but said that this still requires a lot of work from the school.

Baroness Tyler highlighted that we need a national response to catch up programmes and understanding what pupils have missed out on. There is a huge role for the government to play in looking more at how best to organise, structure and fund a national catch up effort.

On catch up, Jane also mentioned that all year 11s are having an extra lesson per day, and the school are running a Saturday school.

### *The role of business*

There were two questions on the role of business in tackling the digital divide. Justin mentioned that there must be many spare devices as businesses update their devices frequently. He asked if this needs national coordination.

Siobhain raised that the poorer you are, the more likely you access services differently, for example using pre-paid gas and electric. The government have engaged with the big names like BT and Vodafone, but lots of people on pay as you go are using other mobile providers, and it is important to include them as well. Justin agreed and raised that one of the most frequent issues in his constituency has been phone credit. Siobhain also mentioned that it is difficult to get data from the government on how successful their schemes have been so far. She said that there has been low take up for the BT voucher scheme and it would be useful to understand why.

Jane said that it is difficult for schools to keep on top of all the schemes being offered and that often these schemes need to be applied for as early as possible to not miss out.

### *Supporting teachers and parents*

The panel were asked about supporting teachers and parents to use technology. Jane mentioned the training that her school has done, but highlighted that the key issue is parental engagement. The school is doing a piece of work on hard-to-reach families and showing them how to help with their child's learning, but this is difficult.

### *Teacher recruitment and retention*

Teacher recruitment and retention was raised, along with the need to support current teachers.

Jane agreed that this was a key issue. She said that not having experienced teachers around is negative for young teachers who are new to the role. The pay freeze has not helped. The issue is not that teachers have done a great job, as lots of professions have done a phenomenal job, but is about recruitment and retention. Applications to teaching has increased this year, but this is likely due to fewer graduate jobs being available. It's naïve to believe the reason that application numbers are increasing is because everyone wants to be a teacher.

The final question from the audience was an ask to be put in contact with Siobhain. Siobhain mentioned the work of AFC Wimbledon, a supporters-based club which came together to develop a project to update old laptops, and has given out over 1,000 to schools.

#### *Catch up*

Justin asked the final question to the panellists, on what can be done to recover the lost learning time that pupils have faced this year, and if this is feasible with all of the other challenges we face.

Javed raised that we need to think about the costs and risks of not acting. Children who are already disadvantaged and have been further impacted by the pandemic will have their life chances impacted, and will likely then need more support throughout their lives. There is a clear business case for acting now.

Siobhain said that she gets the sense that children and their futures are not a top priority. She mentioned that the Department for Education seems to be an afterthought and has been more unable to respond than other departments. Javed said that there should be a cabinet minister responsible for children.

Jane raised that uncertainty around exams is still a big issue, and is impacting on the planning they are able to do. They have told children to trust them but have nothing they can plan for.

Claire highlighted that the pandemic has been presented so far as two key pillars: a health and an economic crisis. She said that the third pillar should be the impact on children, young people and education. The government and public response hasn't focused on children in the same way that it has on health and the economy. There is going to be a lost cohort, with young people affected just because of the age they happened to be at.

David said we have done a lot to protect the elderly – and rightly so – but once again it is younger people already finding it hard to get a job, to get on housing ladder, and who have suffered most from exams, apprenticeships drying up and losing Saturday jobs. As a country we need to get better at recognising young people are the future and maximising their potential.

#### **CLOSING REMARKS**

Jane said that she has enjoyed being able to express the views of headteachers to those who have influence in parliament. Schools are working really hard to put children at the centre of everything they do, but it is not a level playing field. Those in deprived areas feel like they can't do any more and children are going to suffer through no fault of their own.

Javed said that if we are serious about social mobility, levelling up and giving every child the chance to thrive, then we have to end digital poverty. In the most difficult times it's the vulnerable who suffer the most.

Siobhain made a suggestion for those close to local authorities. Money from the community infrastructure levy could be used to provide devices or dongles to local schools. That immediately could liberate thousands of pounds across the councils. Justin mentioned that his local authority has unspent funds so there should be some scope for that.

Justin thanked the panellists for everything they are doing in this field and for joining the session.