

Schools and coronavirus

The government's handling of
education during the pandemic

About this report

The period that followed the closure of schools in March 2020 was easily the most disruptive in children's education since the start of the Second World War. This report, based on interviews with figures within government and education experts, assesses the government's handling of education during the coronavirus pandemic.

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Introduction

On Wednesday 18 March 2020, with just two days' notice, Boris Johnson, in the second of his televised broadcasts from Downing Street, announced that England's 24,000 schools were to close "until further notice" from that Friday evening. Exams, due to take place three months later, were cancelled.

What followed was easily the most disruptive period in children's education since at least the start of the Second World War. Schools closed only to be opened, closed, and then re-opened again. Exams were cancelled, not once but twice, with knock-on effects to university admissions that will be felt for years to come. Parents, heads and teachers struggled – with access to laptops for home schooling, with the home schooling itself, and with coronavirus testing regimes for pupils and staff. Free school meals became a burning political issue. When it came to education, U-turn was to follow U-turn. Well into March 2021, and indeed beyond, pupils taking GCSEs, A-levels and BTecs remained unclear about precisely how they were to be assessed. At times it felt as though the school system was in chaos.

What follows is an analysis of what went wrong – and a few things that went right – in the hope that some lessons might be learnt should the education system ever have to go through anything similar again. It is based on the public record, on two off-the-record roundtables held at the Institute for Government (one on school closures and openings, and one on exams) plus some additional interviews. It is deliberately limited in scope. On exams, it focuses on A-levels rather than GCSEs and BTecs. It does not discuss the challenges faced by those who were home schooled, although those were clearly considerable and the subject of analysis elsewhere. It makes only brief reference to the impact of school decisions on higher and further education. Its focus is predominantly England, not the UK. And it does not address the government's various promises about a recovery programme for lost learning, or, in any detail, the support for online learning during the pandemic.

Its most important conclusion is that the most unforgivable aspect of what happened is not just the failure to make contingency plans in the summer of 2020 but the refusal to do so – when it was already obvious that fresh school closures might well be needed, and that exams might have to be cancelled again. Lessons were not learnt from the first lockdown, with the result that, for both school closures and exams, the story from July 2020 to January 2021 was a case of "pause, rewind, repeat".

Education during the pandemic: the broader context

It is impossible to separate out what happened in schools from the government's handling of the pandemic more generally. The repeated failure to lock down fast enough and hard enough. The prime minister's wild optimism across 2020 – seen in his claim in March last year that “we can turn the tide in 12 weeks” and “send the virus packing”;¹ in April that “we are past the peak”;² in July that there should be “a significant return to normality by Christmas”;³ in November that there was “every reason to believe” that “the worst is nearly behind us”.⁴ More deaths came after November than before it.

Throughout 2020, not just the prime minister but education ministers and in particular Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, seemed determined to appear to be in control of events that they could not in fact control. There were repeated assertions that this or that would happen – that test kits would be available in schools in September, for example, or that schools absolutely would reopen in January 2021, or that exams would definitely be held in 2021 – up to the point where they did not happen, forcing last-minute U-turns. That did not change until 2021 when a ‘roadmap’ driven rather more by data than dates was finally adopted – an approach that finally began to acknowledge the uncertainties and share them with the public, parents and teachers.

There was no plan for school closures

The Department for Education (DfE) was far from alone in not having a plan for a coronavirus pandemic. It was, however, in a worse position than many in that the plan it did have assumed that schools would remain open throughout.

Until mid-March, the department was working to the influenza pandemic plan, which dated from 2011. That strategy stated that in the early stages of a pandemic, local directors of public health might advise school closures to limit the spread. Once the influenza virus was more established, however, “the general policy would be that schools should *not* close [my italic] – unless there are specific local business continuity reasons (staff shortages or particularly vulnerable children)”.⁵ Indeed, in 2016, when the department took part in Operation Cygnus, the government's testing of that plan, the focus had all been on how to keep schools open, including for example bringing in retired staff⁶ – not how to close them.

The decision to break from this plan and close schools was taken over the weekend of Friday 13 to Monday 16 March, the point where the government abandoned its “contain, delay, research and mitigate”⁷ strategy, heading instead towards the first full national lockdown announced on Monday 23 March.

On Monday 16 March, Jonathan Slater, the permanent secretary at DfE, was giving evidence to the Commons Public Accounts Committee, assuring members that there was “lots of work [under way] on all possible eventualities ... I would expect ministers to announce new decisions on the back of that work shortly”.⁸ He was not to know quite how shortly. As he left the hearing at 6.30pm, he was handed a note telling him that the prime minister was going to announce school closures.

By then they had become inevitable. Some had already closed, with surveys showing that around 20% of teachers were self-isolating and school attendance was typically down to 70–80%.⁹

England was still a week away from the compulsory ‘stay at home’ lockdown of 23 March. But the announcement on 16 March, that people should “work from home where they possibly can” and isolate for 14 days if they had a high temperature or new continuous cough was, for schools, the clincher.¹⁰ As one official put it:

“The game changer was whole household isolation on the Monday evening of the 16th. From that moment on it became virtually impossible to keep schools open on a purely pragmatic basis. Effectively anybody who lived in the same household as someone who had a cough, which in March is quite a lot of people, had to isolate at home. It was going to be impossible to keep schools open because there would not be the staff to do so.”

Starting on the evening of 16 March, two days of frantic work went into working out precisely what school closures meant. Complete closure? Or staying open for some pupils? A rapid series of No.10 and Cabinet Office meetings reached agreement that they would remain open for the children of key workers, a list that included health and social care staff who absolutely had to be at work to help cope with the pandemic.* In addition, it was agreed that schools would remain open for vulnerable children – those in touch with a social worker or who had education, health and care plans, for whom school might well be the safest place.

“Obviously it would have been better if we’d had a plan to take off the shelf,” one official said. “You wouldn’t want to do this in 48 hours or less.” But the rapid designation of children of key workers was a part of the education response that did work well: “The Cabinet Office ran a perfectly acceptable process [to define key workers] in which they consulted departments. It was all done at fantastic speed, but it was done reasonably well.”

At these meetings, the view of Chris Whitty, England’s chief medical officer, and Patrick Vallance, the chief scientist, informed by SAGE, was that no more than 20% of pupils should be in school, and ideally only 10%, if school closures were going to help stem the pandemic. Some, including Williamson, feared that schools would be flooded with the children of key workers. That proved unfounded. With the country in full lockdown from 23 March people were clearly frightened, including about sending their children

* The others on the list included utility workers, the police, those in transport and essential shops and journalists.

to school. Fewer than 2% of all pupils attended on average, peaking at 2% in late May, just before schools partially reopened in June. Just 5% of vulnerable pupils were in school on average over this period, reaching a peak of 8% by the end of May.¹¹

Command and control trumped any form of partnership

As he announced the first round of school closures, Gavin Williamson said his department was “working closely with local authorities” and that “we will do whatever is necessary to support local authorities, schools and teachers through the weeks and months ahead”.¹² Had the promise of “working closely” been fulfilled, things might well have worked better. Instead, Williamson was to end up threatening councils with legal action.

When the decision to close schools was taken, the government did not in fact have the power to mandate that. The power to close schools was taken, along with others to direct education providers more generally, in the emergency Coronavirus Act 2020 that became law on 25 March. As a set of reserve powers, that made perfect sense. The explanatory notes to the legislation acknowledge that

“what is in the best interests of those in the education arena will vary according to the level of risk which presents itself in a particular place at a particular time. Accordingly, the Act seeks to take a suite of powers to enable Government to react flexibly to manage differing levels of risk.”¹³

Again, that proved not to be case. The approach was anything but flexible. For the great bulk of the period covered it was highly centralised and close to ‘one size fits all’, taking little account of local circumstances – big outbreaks of the virus in different parts of the country at different times, for example, or understanding what individual schools, given the shape of their buildings, could do in terms of social distancing. Relations with the teaching unions were never good and were to reach a nadir in December with threats of legal action when schools and local authorities sought to take their own decisions. That was then followed by an on-the-day U-turn over schools being open in January 2021.

Ministers distrusted local government

“My ministers absolutely hate local government,” one DfE insider said. “They hate it because far too much of it is Labour. They believe local government is stuffed full of progressives who do not believe in phonics. The role of local authorities in education is a very contested space, and the whole point of the academy programme is to get schools off councils.* The idea that we would use local government to manage anything that we did not have to was complete anathema.”

At the roundtables and in interviews we heard a debate about whether it was merely ministers’ attitudes to local authorities that was the issue or whether the structure of the school system in England was itself a problem in handling the pandemic.

* After the 2015 general election the Conservative government proposed forced academisation of all schools. That was defeated by a backlash from Conservative-run local authorities and ‘shire’ Tory MPs who believed their maintained schools worked well. For an account see Timmins N, *The Five Giants: A Biography of the Welfare State*, William Collins, 2017, pp. 672–674.

For three decades, governments of all colours in England have been constraining the role of local authorities in education, starting in 1988 with the local management of schools. Labour introduced academies in the 2000s – a targeted programme that provided a genuinely fresh start for failing secondary schools and that, at a price, provided new buildings and new staff, with the academy run as a not-for-profit trust. By 2010 there were just over 200 academies out of some 3,500 secondaries. Under Michael Gove as education secretary, the coalition hugely expanded that programme, providing financial incentives for good schools to become academies and requiring failing schools, including primaries, to become academies, with academies over time encouraged to form chains of schools in what is known as a multi-academy trust (MAT).

That meant that by early 2020 the department was directly responsible for the funding and thus very largely the oversight of more than 8,700 schools. These ranged from standalone, single academies to those in one of the 1,170 MATs. The size of these, and thus the support they can provide to individual schools, varies enormously. The biggest have more than 40 schools in them. Some 1,600 academies, however, are single schools, and a further 500 are in an MAT consisting of no more than three schools. The department does have a very limited regional structure to act as a liaison with these thousands of schools, but, as one insider put it to us, the regional school commissioners do not remotely have the resource or firepower that the various forms of health authority have in the NHS, for example.

In early 2020, the drive towards academisation still left almost two thirds of primary schools and almost a quarter of secondaries as local authority maintained. Councils also retain a range of wider responsibilities for all schools that include school meals and transport and ensuring that there are enough school places locally, as well as making sure that those with special educational needs are catered for. The thrust of policy, however, remains to turn all schools into academies,¹⁴ further diminishing the role of local authorities.

One highly experienced academy leader put it to us this way:

“The education system used to work where the department held the ring and local authorities were responsible for schools. Now we have this very complex mix of single academies, multi-academy trusts and local authorities, and none of us have a clearly enough articulated role in a situation like this.

“The department did not really have a communication network which was functional for the vast majority of schools. That led to very prescriptive decision making, because if your only real way of communicating with people is in writing in a guidance document, it is difficult to get over your broad intentions and purpose, and you fall back on rules and stipulations.

“It does raise a much bigger issue about how the school system is configured. Whether you are in the local authority or the academy world, you would not start from here in designing an education system.”

By contrast, we heard the view from another in the academy sector that “the issues are largely attitudinal rather than structural. Ministers could have used local authorities much more, but they have generally refused to clarify their role in the system and refused to engage with them. There is nothing intrinsic in our current set up that would stop this from happening.”

That attitude played out over school meals

This piece does not go into the details of the two defeats over school meal provision over the holidays that the government suffered at the hands of the Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford, then 22. But it does look at the initial decision to opt for a national voucher scheme in England. The education department considered four options: passing money to eligible parents and children through Universal Credit and tax credits; funding local authorities, or directly funding schools; and a national scheme.¹⁵

The benefit system proved not to be an option. The information that identifies who is eligible is held at school and local authority level and Universal Credit was anyway shortly to be hit by a deluge of new claims. Ministers were reluctant to give schools cash, partly for security reasons and partly because that would risk face-to-face contact during the pandemic. And there was never any serious likelihood of funding local authorities, despite that being “the obvious thing to do” in the words of one DfE insider. “They were much closer to the action, and there are 150 of them. They have much more capacity than the department. But ministers hated local government and they wanted central control.” So the decision was for a national voucher scheme, using Edenred, which had an existing framework contract with government that covered employee benefits and which included the delivery of gift vouchers.

The meal vouchers took the form of e-gift cards, although paper vouchers could be printed. Edenred’s IT system, however, proved unable to cope with the demand. School administrators and teachers found themselves logging on during the small hours to get access to the e-codes that in turn gave parents access to the vouchers. In the early days, a survey by the National Association of Head Teachers found almost all schools (96%) reporting problems. Parents equally reported delays of hours in gaining access so that they could turn the e-code into vouchers.

Furthermore, the company originally had deals for electronic gift cards with only six supermarkets – Asda, Tesco, Morrisons, Sainsbury’s, M&S and Waitrose. Critics were swift to point out that the last two were hardly likely to be supermarkets of choice for those on free school meals. For more than 10% of schools, the only participating supermarket was more than five kilometres away, and in April it was taking Edenred an *average* of five days to process e-codes.¹⁶ Low-income families struggled to access food. Some schools decided to run their own scheme for which the department did eventually reimburse them, and in time the vouchers became available at Aldi, Iceland and McColl’s. Performance did slowly improve so that four months later, by July, the time to process orders on the website and send out the e-codes had dropped to 0.16 days.

Another DfE official told us that had all this happened in 2010 – when England’s school structure was appreciably simpler, with just over 200 academies among the 3,000 secondary schools – local authorities would have been used.

“It would have been done through local authorities. There was a very clear delivery chain that went from central government to local authorities and on to schools. I am not saying we should go back to that. But it was a clear delivery chain.”

In contrast to England, Scotland and Wales both funnelled money through local authorities. A report from Audit Wales¹⁷ makes clear that the local authority route worked far better there than the arrangements in England, and the impression is that the same was true for Scotland. A report from the Education Policy Institute similarly concludes that families outside England

“appear to have had better access to timely and appropriate support. In Wales and Scotland, governments allowed a greater amount of local discretion in the delivery of support, relying on existing infrastructure and allowing responses to be tailored to the needs of families.”¹⁸

It is worth noting that when Marcus Rashford won his second battle to get food to less well-off children during school holidays, ministers put money into an existing local-authority-run programme. Perhaps this was one of the few lessons learnt during the pandemic when it came to schools.

Local authorities found DfE harder to deal with than other government departments

The department did set up Regional Education and Children’s Teams during the pandemic, based around the regional school commissioners, “to better co-ordinate... how the Department and Ofsted capture information and intelligence about local needs and circumstances”.¹⁹

A London council leader said lots more constructive cross-party working went on between local authorities and ministers in other departments – notably the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

“There was sometimes conflict. But there was a process for getting through the issues that avoided the sorts of situations we saw when councils were being threatened with legal action by the education department. Relations were significantly worse with education. There was a lack of understanding of the role of local authorities and that the directors of public health had a role with all the schools on their patch, regardless of whether they were academies or local authority maintained.”

Education was not unique in failing to use the local public health system – the “trace” part of Test and Trace was originally set up as a centralised call system that produced very poor results, which improved somewhat when local government, with its local knowledge and local expertise, finally began to be used.

A senior director of public health in the Midlands told us:

“We are trying to twin track how can we control the pandemic and slow it down, versus the fact that we know that kids not being in education is really bad for their mental health and educational attainment. We are juggling that all the time locally. But DfE are very, very top down. Their relationship with schools is that we will tell you something, and you will do it.

“Furthermore, they think of schools as units, while we see them as part of the community. When we have an outbreak in a school it is not just about the school. It is about the mums and dads coming into the playground and kids going back to grandparents’ houses, so we need to treat the school as part of an ecosystem. The school may be part of the problem but may also be part of the solution. We know how children move across the borough to go to school, and we have a lot of soft intelligence, including from very good relationships with heads – regardless of whether their schools are academies or maintained – and with whom we meet weekly for two-way feedback on how we tackle problems. We border a big city and have flows both ways across the boundary. We now know that if it goes in one bit of our borough it will go into the rest of it very quickly. There has been a problem throughout about to what extent is the national system prepared to allow for local autonomy and decision making.”

The most extreme example of that, of course, occurred in December 2020, with the rise of the more infectious Alpha (or Kent) variant, starting in the south-east and London. Hospital admissions were again rising sharply and in mid-December London’s mayor, Sadiq Khan, called for secondary schools to switch to online teaching for the final two weeks of term to reduce the risk that pupils would take the virus into homes over Christmas.²⁰ The two head teachers’ unions said the same should happen wherever infection rates were high.²¹ Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), said the government should allow schools to make their own decisions, adding: “It is deeply unfair on school leaders, teachers, families and pupils that they are caught between the heavy-handed approach of central government and increasing alarm at local infection rates.”²²

When individual schools and some London boroughs, including Greenwich, Islington and Waltham Forest, declared that was what they were going to do, the response of education ministers was to threaten them with legal action under the coronavirus legislation.²³

Just days later, however, Williamson was to announce that three million pupils in secondary schools would do precisely that – switch to online learning – for the first week of the January term to allow them to set up mass testing for their pupils.²⁴ That came a mere week before Christmas, with the head teachers and teaching unions branding the testing plan as simply “inoperable”.²⁵ Then, on 30 December, five days ahead of the start of the school term, and in apparent response to that reaction, Williamson announced that secondary schools and colleges would remain closed for an additional week, until 18 January, to try to get the testing regime in place. With the

virus increasingly out of control he also announced that primary schools in 50 council areas would now not open on 4 January – in other words in a third of the 152 local authorities. That decision, he said, would be reviewed on 18 January.²⁶

A significant proportion of the councils affected were in London. But when the map became available showing which local authority's schools would open and which would remain closed, there was a mix of bafflement and outrage. London was in Tier 4 – then the highest level of restrictions. Primaries were to be closed for at least two weeks in 23 boroughs, while remaining open in nine.* The nine all had higher infection rates than the England average while among those being told to close their schools were Kensington and Chelsea, along with Westminster, both of which had lower rates of infection than other London boroughs. Local authorities could make neither head nor tail of the decisions, with council leaders and others complaining that it appeared totally to ignore the fact that many thousands of pupils cross borough boundaries to go to school. Sadiq Khan described the decisions as “nonsensical ... it shows that the government does not understand our city”.²⁷

One council leader said: “Nobody in the London system had been involved in those decisions and no one could explain why some boroughs were to have their schools open and some were not. Nobody understood that.” A London borough chief executive said: “It absolutely exposed the real fault lines [between central and local government]. I have never experienced a government decision that has made me so personally deeply angry. It was just incomprehensible.”

Two days later, with admissions to some hospitals in London and the south-east already higher than in the first wave, Williamson changed course again, declaring that all primaries in London would remain closed until 18 January. As he did so, some counties around London were declaring major incidents.²⁸

This was when the relationship between ministers, local authorities and the teaching unions – including head teachers – approached its nadir. The two head teachers' unions instructed lawyers to write to Williamson giving him barely 48 hours to supply the scientific information that showed it was safe to keep schools open. The National Education Union, representing some 450,000 teachers and other staff, told its members that it was not safe to return to school until at least mid-January – although it did support online learning and keeping schools open for key workers and vulnerable children. The union provided its members with a template letter to send to head teachers, explaining that, under employment law, they were refusing to go into work because their workplace was unsafe. As a member of one of our roundtables put it drily:

“This was not the behaviour of actors in a well-functioning system. It was a fast-moving situation. But I don't think it is harsh to look at this period as one of the more shambolic bits of government decision making that there has been throughout this pandemic. It is hard to look at this and find a defensible series of decisions.”

* Camden, Greenwich, Hackney, Haringey, Harrow, Islington, Kingston, Lambeth and Lewisham plus the City of London.

U-turn having followed U-turn, the picture was finally completed on Monday 4 January 2021. Primary schools, to differing degrees, did open in the 100 or so local authorities that the government had designated. But that evening, at 8pm, with hospital admissions well above the peak of the first wave, Boris Johnson announced the most severe national lockdown since March 2020. School closures were included.

“Parents whose children were in school today may reasonably ask why we did not take this decision sooner,” the prime minister conceded. “The answer is simply that we have been doing everything in our power to keep schools open, because we know how important each day in education is to children’s life chances.” While schools were safe for children, he said, “they may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission”.²⁹

Two days later a poll by Teacher Tapp of an admittedly self-selecting sample, but one that included almost 6,000 responses, showed that 92% of teachers believed that Williamson should resign. Justine Greening, the former Conservative education secretary, said it was clear that he had “lost the confidence” of teachers. Choosing who was in the cabinet was a matter for the prime minister, she said, “but trust will come back with a plan, and with a team that people have confidence can deliver that plan”.³⁰ Labour, perhaps inevitably, was again calling for him to go. Despite the Scarborough-born Williamson being one of its own, *The Yorkshire Post* called for him to be sacked if he would not take “the honourable course” and resign.³¹

The department did not grasp the role of directors of public health

A key problem with relationships between DfE and local authorities was the failure to grasp the role of local directors of public health (DPH). The Health and Social Care Act 2012 shifted the responsibility for local public health out of the NHS and into local government, and the health department appears to have forgotten about the existence of the local DPHs, all of whom are trained in epidemiology, a key skill in handling a pandemic.

At the start of the coronavirus outbreak, “the Department of Health did not even have the names and contacts for local directors of public health”, Maggie Rae, president of the Faculty of Public Health, told us. So it is no surprise that DfE initially struggled to grasp their role. But even now Professor Rae, speaking in June 2021, says relations remain “fairly fractious”.

The 2012 health legislation, she says, also diluted the power of public health directors, giving them a responsibility to “assure” the system locally, rather than deliver it.

“The lack of clarity about who is responsible has been a significant feature since the beginning of the pandemic. ‘Assure’ is a very difficult word with which to be clear about roles and responsibilities. The local DPH will always have a view. But what we have had is a lack of clarity about whose view takes prominence and who is actually the decision maker.”

We did hear that after the mayhem of December 2020 and January 2021, and after the government said it would be driven more by data than by dates, relations with local authorities did improve. Problems remained, however, over clarity of decision making. In June 2021, with the Delta variant on the march, one public health director said school heads in her area, along with the regional health protection team,^{*} had all agreed that they wanted to reinstate mask-wearing in school. “We were told ‘you have to apply.’” But exactly to whom was not clear. Even at this late stage in the pandemic, she reported that:

“we could not even establish who was the decision maker. Was it DfE? Was it the Joint Biosecurity Centre? We could not even get an agreement about who was going to make the decision. So in the end we thought it the right thing to do locally, so we did it.

“DfE feels a particularly insular and siloed department, with a lack of connect, at a very senior level, between itself, DHSC and the public health policy response.

“We accept that central government wants to have eyes on what is going on locally, and you need a sensible dialogue. But we needed to make a decision, and quickly.”

Over this period, with infection and self-isolation rates high and with whole classes or year groups being sent home in some cases,³² some schools started switching to online learning.³³ This time round, however, as schools or groups of schools took individual decisions, ministers appeared to accept that, without intervening.

Professor Rae said: “We keep trying to tell ministers, ‘you cannot deliver from the centre’. You can set policy from the centre and do strategy from the centre, but delivery always has to be local. And they just failed to realise that.”

Relations between No.10 and DfE were damaging

In the end, of course, the prime minister is responsible for everything. But from early on, according to one No.10 source, “there was a feeling that the handling from DfE was not up to standard. There was a constant concern that there was going to be a crisis on the horizon. It was in the early summer when it really started to flag up.”

It is clear that some of the crucial decisions were in fact taken in No.10, and Williamson appears not to have been directly involved in any of the key meetings ahead of the original decision to close schools in March 2020. “This was,” a No.10 insider says, “a decision at the centre.”

There were also real tensions between No.10 and the department over what should happen when schools reopened in June 2020 – the ultimate outcome proving “confidence shredding” for many in the education sector.

^{*} Regional health protection teams bring together public health directors and skills from Public Health England, NHS England and the NHS more locally, including those of microbiologists and infection control teams.

The prime minister had originally declared on 11 May that “it may be possible” to get Reception, and Years 1 and 6 of primary schools (children aged 4–6 and 10–11) back on 1 June 2020. The broader ambition was “for all primary school children to return to school before the summer for a month if feasible”, with those in Years 10 and 12, who were facing exams the following year, having at least some face-to-face time with teachers.³⁴

That outline plan was decided not in the education department but in No.10, according to Osama Rahman, the department’s chief scientific adviser, who told the Commons Science and Technology Select Committee two days later that it was “a cabinet decision”, not DfE’s.³⁵ The aim of getting all primary children back before the end of term was also a No.10 decision, according to DfE officials. “It first appeared in a No.10 document,” one says, “and that had not been discussed with stakeholders previously. But it then of course made its way into DfE guidance.”

Williamson and Johnson did debate that outline plan, and as consultations took place, school leaders and the education unions were against the youngest children returning, arguing that older primary pupils could be expected to understand social distancing, but that the younger ones would not. A No.10 insider says Williamson did robustly make that case.

Just ahead of the final announcement, those being consulted believed they had an agreement that Years 5 and 6 would go back, but not the younger pupils. As that went into No.10, however, “it was all blown out of the water”, according to Geoff Barton, ASCL general secretary, the head teachers’ union. “I had sight of what Boris was going to say on Saturday morning, the day before he said it. We had strong reservations. We said that Reception and Year 1 were the least likely to understand social distancing. We kept making the point that Years 5 and 6 would be better.”³⁶ In end, according to both No.10 and DfE sources, the decision was taken without Williamson present.

“The reason that it came out not the way it went in was that the PM and the Treasury wanted to prioritise the economic impact,” said a No.10 insider. “The younger children are the harder ones to home school, as anyone who has young children will tell you, so focusing on them made it easier for parents who had to work from home or indeed go into work, while older pupils can better use the technology to learn at home.”

So the final decision was that Reception and Year 1 and 6 would go back, as originally proposed – although with all children operating in half class sizes with “bubbles” of no more than 15 pupils. The ambition remained to get all primary schools back before the end of the summer term.

That last-minute change to something that people believed had been agreed, and the ambition that all primary pupils would go back, dissipated the trust between the education secretary and the whole sector, not just the teaching unions. As one local authority chief executive put it:

“What went in [to No.10] as a decision that felt as though it was understood [by the sector] came out as something less understood. If the unions and parents and others associated with school staff do not understand the decision it becomes very much more difficult for those decisions to hold and to have legitimacy. The engagement with the decision, and communication of it, was not effective and robust enough. It contributed to wider uncertainty and undermined confidence.”

The leader of one MAT said that in declaring the ambition that all primary pupils would return by the summer,

“the department was saying something that it just did not believe and which it knew was wrong.

“Nobody in the department from ministers to officials believed that could happen, on the basis of the guidance about bubbles of 15 pupils.* We knew that there were neither the staff nor the space to open all schools up fully before the end of term. Everyone in the department knew that and yet it went into the guidance. And I am as clear as I can be that it came from No.10 and was insisted on by No.10 ... it is a credibility-shredding thing to do to say you are going to try to do that when you have no way of trying to do that.”

Other issues

There were other criticisms of the government’s handling of schools and coronavirus, including from the National Audit Office (NAO). Communication with schools and local authorities was a problem well into 2021 – due in part, perhaps, to the complexity of the English school system. Aside from the seven under-resourced regional school commissioners, it left the department trying to have a conversation with more than 20,000 schools.

Between mid-March and the end of May 2020 no fewer than 148 new guidance documents, or updates to existing material, were issued to schools. Much of it was published at the end of a week or late in the evening, according to the NAO, “putting schools under pressure, especially when guidance was for immediate implementation”. In addition, “when the guidance was updated, schools were not always clear what changes had been made”.³⁷ A further blizzard was to arrive later in the year as the decisions on school opening and closures seemed to change almost daily in December 2020 and January 2021.

There were problems about the supply of laptops for remote learning, always likely to be an issue given the sudden surge in global demand. The education department used a central contract with Computacenter. Placed on 19 April, effectively a month after schools were locked down, most were sourced overseas. The first 50,000 of an initial 200,000 order arrived on 11 May, but many schools did not receive supplies until June,

* Primary schools have seven years from Reception to Year 6, typically of 30 pupils or so. Bringing back three years split into half-size classes requires six classrooms and six teachers. Adding a fourth year might be possible physically using halls, libraries etc, but would require extra teachers. Anything above that – bringing another three year groups back in bubbles of 15 – was seen as impossible in terms of both space and teaching staff.

and some not until the last week of the summer term.³⁸ Wales, with a seemingly more advanced digital strategy for schools, appears to have done better, delivering by the end of May proportionally as many devices as England did by the end of the summer term.³⁹ Complaints about shortages of laptops and routers ran on in England into January 2021.

By March 2021, however, 1.3 million devices – laptops, tablets and routers – had been despatched, with a DfE analysis concluding that the UK had delivered considerably more equipment over 2020 than 19 other European countries.⁴⁰ That provision is likely to have a lasting positive effect on the education of the children who received them.

This piece does not explore in any detail the issues of lost learning during the pandemic. But the department did, in May 2020, fund Oak National Academy to provide online lessons and video resources for remote learning. In June it added £4.34 million to its initial £500,00 subvention so that the materials could be expanded to cover a much fuller curriculum. An NAO survey of stakeholders judged this to be a “helpful, high quality resource”.⁴¹ There was initial criticism of the guidance DfE issued on remote learning. But the guidance did steadily improve, with links and resources for both schools and parents on how best to handle remote learning. The department also funded two free-to-use educational platforms that allow the creation of virtual classrooms.⁴² These measures were not transformational – there has, inevitably, been much lost learning. But they clearly helped.

Exams: round one

The run-up to examinations in 2020

In the run-up to the announcement that the 2020 exams round would be cancelled, DfE had started to consult with England's exams regulator, Ofqual, and a limited number of others on what the consequences of this might be. This was part of the "lots of work" that Jonathan Slater had obliquely informed the Public Accounts Committee about.

No one, from the prime minister down, wanted to cancel exams. But as one DfE insider put it, such was the uncertainty over for how long schools would be closed and how the pandemic would develop that "we could just not get assurances that it would be safe to have young people in schools sitting exams in the summer. So the decision was to go with certainty, even if it was far from ideal." The department put up "all the options you would expect from the civil service", including whether there should be 'school leaving certificates' rather than grades.

One of those closely involved in the consultation said:

"There was definitely a political concern around what would be publicly acceptable. There was a sense that even if you could do exams in a socially distanced manner, the idea that you were going to say to parents in the middle of a pandemic, 'now please bring your kids into school, we are going to make them sit an exam, even though there might be a health risk – because you can't reduce it to zero' – that seemed like a recipe for disaster. The idea that people might be outraged at having been given a grade that they were unable to control or influence, one that was just generated, was, at the time, much less vivid. And there was a sense that we are in a war-time atmosphere. If things were not perfect, people would understand."

Ofqual's initial stance was that ideally exams should be held in a socially distanced manner. Failing that, they should be delayed, and failing that it should look at "some form of calculated grade" – or even simply issue teachers' certificates for A-levels, combining that with a big expansion of university places.⁴³ In hindsight, Roger Taylor, the chair of Ofqual at the time, says that might have been the best solution. Civil servants say it was considered, although Taylor says that to his knowledge "never seriously" – even though, as he points out, in practice, "by a painful, chaotic and unplanned route, that is where all four countries [of the UK] ended up".⁴⁴

On 31 March, without any further consultation with Ofqual, according to Taylor, Williamson confirmed that exams would be cancelled and that pupils would be given calculated results.⁴⁵

One civil servant says that failing to find a way of holding exams even in a modified form “might be seen as a failure of imagination on our part”. Indeed, at the Institute for Government roundtable there was a minority view that some form of examination might indeed have been possible given that infection rates had in fact fallen significantly by the exam season (usually beginning in June). Some other European countries, Germany included, did manage to hold them – although quite where each country was at each stage of the pandemic varied. But the majority view that we heard was that cancellation was inevitable.

The ‘algorithm’

On 3 April, Ofqual issued an outline guide as to how grades would be awarded.⁴⁶ There were queries and concerns, but there was appreciable initial support for the approach.⁴⁷ One or two voices even suggested that it might prove fairer than the usual examination system.⁴⁸ Grades would be decided by a mixture of teacher assessment and adjustment, with teachers ranking children within their class, with those results then put through “a process of standardisation” – what became known as ‘the algorithm’. It would take into account “the expected national outcomes for this year’s students, the prior attainment of students at each school and college (at cohort, not individual level), and the results of the school or college in recent years”.⁴⁹ Notably, England was not alone within the UK in deciding to use an algorithm to adjust results. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all did the same, although the precise nature of the formulae they used differed.

Assessing pupils’ performance was not helped by the fact that moderated coursework had come to play a much smaller part of GCSE and A-level awards for many subjects. Given schools were closed in March, only some of it would have been available. But it might have helped. In the years leading up to 2020, results had come increasingly to depend only on the examination, with much less if any coursework contributing to the outcome* (although that is not a view either for or against the change).

One absolutely key issue, as we heard from both Ofqual and the department, was that ministers were desperate to avoid grade inflation. It was “a totemic” issue. As one official it:

“One of the things that the government has been proudest of since 2010, and one to which they are most committed in respect of school standards, was the work they had done to tackle what they saw as grade inflation under the previous regime. It was a first order principle that was baked in from the beginning.”

Hence the need to standardise results, given that teacher assessment is known to vary with an understandable tendency to over-mark. Others point out that the results needed to be seen to be fair between different schools and colleges and between successive cohorts of children.

* Other than in practical subjects such as art and music.

Williamson's direction to Ofqual at the end of March reflected the concern over grade inflation: "Ofqual should ensure, as far as is possible, that qualification standards are maintained and the distribution of grades follows a similar profile to that in previous years" was the instruction.⁵⁰

In April, Ofqual issued a fuller consultation on how results would be handled. The consultation debated the weight that should be given to teacher assessments as they were standardised, against putting more weight in the algorithm on the past performance of schools and colleges – the latter being Ofqual's preferred option. In May, it confirmed that the latter would be its approach.⁵¹ Just over half of respondents (54%) supported that in the consultation, with 33% opposed. Once the full details of the algorithm emerged, however, concerns started to grow.

There were worries, for example, that taking a school's past performance into account would disadvantage pupils in improving schools, or with particularly good cohorts (and all schools know that they have "good" years and less good ones). Ofqual's algorithm, it was argued, was incapable of adjusting grades at the individual pupil level, something that Ofqual itself acknowledged at the time, stating that "it is true that a highly statistical standardisation model will operate at centre not individual student level. It cannot reflect the possibility of individual students doing better or worse than would be predicted by the statistics."⁵²

As time went by, these concerns became more public.⁵³ Sir Jon Coles, chief executive of the United Learning MAT and a former schools director within DfE, warned: "We are experiencing a slow-motion car crash towards the least just results season in history."⁵⁴ When people complained that improving schools would be disadvantaged, as would very bright pupils in poorly performing schools, Ofqual's response was:

"While we recognise that a small number of centres would like standardised grades to reflect their recent or expected improvements in results, our research into GCSE grading shows the performance of centres rarely improves (or deteriorates) consistently in the short term. Because of this, we do not believe it is possible to design a statistically robust model which could reliably predict such improvements or deteriorations."⁵⁵

Its view was that schools' and pupils' objections to their results would be dealt with by appeals. As early as May, however, Ofqual had highlighted to ministers "the risk of widespread dissatisfaction" with the grades that would be awarded.⁵⁶ One vastly experienced school leader said:

"I had an extraordinary three months of trying to talk to people in Ofqual, in DfE, and ultimately with ministers about the inevitable problems. And the extraordinary feature of those conversations was that at almost every level of Ofqual and at almost every level in the department, when I explained what the problem was, they seemed to agree it was the problem – and that included ministers ultimately. And yet nobody changed anything."

According to DfE insiders, ministers were fully aware that there would be a row.

“One could have had a different debate, and allowed for some grade inflation,” one said. “But preventing or at least restricting grade inflation was totemic. It did not need clever civil servants to point out to the secretary of state that when faced, on the results day, with young people disappointed that they had not got what they thought they would get – what their teachers thought on the one hand and what the algorithm had produced – he was not going to win that argument on the news. He had worked it out for himself. He did not think, none of us thought, that it was impossible to sustain the position, despite the onslaught of attack there would be.

“We thought we were in extraordinary times. But with hindsight that was a poor decision. Up to the top of government, politicians understood the hit they would be taking. Though not, obviously, as bad as it was.”

A No.10 insider confirms that. “There were assurances from DfE that it was fine, and that it was the right approach. There would be a row, but it was rideable. That’s what No.10 was being told.” In practice it became not so easy to ride as teachers began to realise the effects the algorithm would have on individual pupils.

Scotland U-turns on its algorithm

And then there was Scotland. It had used a different algorithm to adjust its exam results. But when they came out on 4 August, 124,000 teacher assessments proved to have been downgraded – a quarter of the total. Some appeared completely inexplicable, down from a predicted A to a C or even lower. University places were being lost as a result. Within a week, on 11 August, Scotland changed course, dumping its algorithm in favour of teacher-only assessments.⁵⁷

On the day Scotland U-turned, Williamson said: “I’m confident the system Ofqual has put in place is fundamentally a fair one that will award the vast majority of students a calculated grade that genuinely reflects the grade they would have achieved.”⁵⁸ This was a message he kept repeating, even while officials in DfE were growing increasingly worried about “outlier” results (big and seemingly incomprehensible differences between teacher-assessed and calculated grades),⁵⁹ something Ofqual had again briefed them about in the week prior to the Scotland change.

Sensing trouble ahead, the day before A-level results for England were published, Williamson promised a “triple lock” through which pupils could take their calculated grade, appeal to receive a valid mock result (without any definition, or indeed any clear idea, of what a ‘valid’ mock would be in these circumstances⁶⁰) or sit autumn exams.⁶¹

The day of publication, 13 August, returned an all-time high of A and A*s. But almost 40% of predicted grades – a much higher percentage than in Scotland – were downgraded, with 3.5% going down two grades or more. The media was full of tearful tales from distraught pupils who had lost university places. Williamson urged schools to appeal. Asked on Sky News whether he would give “a cast-iron guarantee” that he would not be forced into the same U-turn as Scotland, he replied: “Absolutely.”

But given that Scotland had not been able to hold the line with a quarter of results downgraded, the idea that England would be able to do so with approaching half of all results was for the birds. As the A-level results came out it was clear that the GCSE ones would be affected in the same way.

On Saturday 15 August, Williamson told *The Times* that there would be “no U-turn, no change” and “this is it”. Following Scotland and using predicted grades would produce “rampant grade inflation”, he said.⁶²

On Monday 17 August, however, the inevitable happened. Pupils were to be given the higher of either their predicted or their calculated grade, with the same applying to GCSEs. Williamson appeared to blame Ofqual for the debacle, claiming he had only become aware “over the Saturday and Sunday” of the scale of the problem, and that he had “consistently asked a large number of challenging questions about the system. Its robustness and its fairness. We’d been constantly reassured about that.”

In a round of media interviews the following day, he went further saying that Ofqual “didn’t deliver” the fair system expected.⁶³ It took an excoriating draft resignation letter from Roger Taylor, Ofqual’s chair, pointing out just who was responsible for which decision, and a lengthy meeting with Williamson, for DfE then to declare that “we have full confidence in Ofqual and its leadership in their role as independent regulator”.⁶⁴ By contrast, when Scotland had reverted to teacher-assessed grades, Nicola Sturgeon absolved Ofqual’s equivalent body, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, of blame, saying “we did not get this right” and adding that “I don’t attach any blame to the SQA for this. This is ministers’ responsibility.”⁶⁵ The contrast could not have been starker.

A week after the English grades assessment U-turn, Sally Collier resigned as chief executive of Ofqual. The next day Jonathan Slater, whose five-year term as permanent secretary at DfE was due to end in May 2021, stepped down. The prime minister declared that it was time for “fresh official leadership”. A “Downing Street source” reported that the decision had been made a month prior, claiming it was unrelated to the exams row,⁶⁶ and that Johnson had “concluded a while ago that he was not confident in Slater”. It was clear that he had been sacked.⁶⁷

Dave Penman, general secretary of the senior civil servants’ union, the FDA, accused the government of “throwing him under a bus”, declaring that “ministerial accountability is dead”. Calls for the secretary of state to resign were not universal, but they were by now legion, including from the Institute for Government,⁶⁸ with even senior Conservatives declining to back him.⁶⁹

“Pause, rewind, repeat”: the failure to make contingency plans

The single biggest issue has, however, to be the failure in the summer and autumn of 2020 to learn lessons from the first wave of the pandemic – and to make contingency plans. On learning lessons, if the Commons Public Accounts Committee is to be believed, as of the end of May 2021, DfE had yet to carry out “a full review of its response during the early stages to identify lessons to improve its emergency preparedness and response to any future disruptions”.⁷⁰

And on contingency planning, over the summer and autumn of 2020 there was not just a *failure* to do that. There was a *refusal* to, and on the part of both No.10 and DfE.

As early as 9 June 2020, Gavin Williamson was declaring with absolute certainty that schools would reopen in September and that exams would, unequivocally, take place in 2021. But even the same month – and well ahead of the 2020 exam results – many voices, and not just in the teaching unions, were pleading for a Plan B.

“None of us knows what the coronavirus situation will look like in September,” Geoff Barton, of the ASCL head teachers’ union, said. “So we think it would be sensible to have a Plan B if the conditions do not allow for a full reopening. This is not a case of us being negative, but merely a pragmatic suggestion given the uncertainty that lies ahead.”⁷¹

Neil Ferguson, on whose Imperial College model, along with other models, SAGE relied on throughout, warned that the return of secondary schools in the autumn would increase the transmission rate. Ministers, he said, would have to decide whether children went back to school on a one-week-on, one-week-off basis “or whether we row back on the relaxation of restrictions in the rest of society to allow schools to be fully opened, for instance social venues, leisure venues, more working from home – those things.”⁷²

As late as September, as schools were about to open, Mary Bousted, general secretary of the National Education Union, was saying there “needs to be a Plan B in case of regional or national spikes to ensure all students can remain connected to learning. What is the government’s Plan B in the event that the scientists say that school opening will take the R rate over 1 either regionally or nationally? This is surely just common sense.”⁷³

One experienced school leader whom the government did consult put it bluntly:

“Government did not contingency plan. And it did not contingency plan quite deliberately. Which was really quite odd. There were moments when lots of people were saying that they wanted schools open and they wanted exams to take place, but ... ‘What if? Should we not have a plan for if schools have to close after Christmas for example, or it turns out that we can’t have exams?’ And the government did not want to do that. My strong impression is that this was No.10 driven.

“It seemed to be driven by the view that if you make a contingency plan it makes it more likely to happen in some way. Which is a very peculiar way of thinking about the world. An unsophisticated attitude to risk. So we ended up, far too many times, in a position where, without much planning having gone on, a late decision was made.”

Both DfE officials and No.10 sources confirm not just the failure but the refusal to make contingency plans. A DfE official told us:

“There was an anxiety that if you do contingency planning, it leaks. So you end up with the inevitable story in *Schools Week* saying that the government is planning for another lockdown, with all the ripple effects of that. And contingency planning takes resource. So if you are doing that, you are not doing other things that ministers might want to happen. It would mean that other treasured projects could have to be sacrificed.”

Another civil servant said:

“Ministers were very keen to demonstrate that they were in charge, they had got a clear plan, this is what it is. That is a theme that we can all see whether we were civil servants or not. And that does go to the notion that having a contingency plan if things go wrong is seen by some ministers as a negative thought. If you plan for the worst, you are probably going to get it. And we were working for a set of politicians who wanted to be clear that they were in charge, and that they knew what they were doing.”

A No.10 source says that “the clear steer” that officials received from the prime minister was not to make contingency plans. Schools were going to reopen. Exams would be held. The view was that “if you prepare for these things not happening, then the outcome is that they are far more likely not to happen ... people will look for the easy way out and take it.” According to this insider, the prime minister’s “default is to bluff. To talk up things to such an extent that they will happen through the force of his own personality. Which is a very powerful tool. But the virus doesn’t listen to those messages.”

On school openings and closures, the department did, at the very end of November 2020, publish a “schools contingency framework”. But the framework made – and still makes – crystal clear that all decisions about what might need to happen locally “will be ministerial decisions made on an area-by-area basis in the light of all available evidence, public health advice and local and national circumstances”. It went on to say that “no educational setting should move to implement restrictive measures of the kind set out in the contingency framework without the explicit approval of DfE”. There was, again, to be no local discretion.⁷⁴

Exams: round two

The failure to make contingency plans meant that on 4 January 2021, as the closure of all schools was again announced, the prime minister was left stating that “we recognise that this will mean it is not possible or fair for all exams to go ahead this summer as normal”. But in the absence of a contingency plan, all he could say in addition was that “the education secretary will work with Ofqual to put in place alternative arrangements”.⁷⁵

On 6 January, Gavin Williamson was unable to spell out how GCSEs, A-levels and BTecs would be assessed, beyond the slogan that it was “time to trust teachers, not algorithms”. Geoff Barton, as head of the ASCL union, again said:

“It is frustrating that there is not an off-the-shelf Plan B ready to go. We have repeatedly called on the government and the regulator to prepare such a plan in the event of exams being cancelled, and have repeatedly offered to work with them in doing so.

“However, ministers have been so busy insisting that exams will take place that they have failed to ensure that there is a contingency system which can be immediately rolled out. This is, frankly, a dereliction of duty.”⁷⁶

Ofqual and DfE started a two-week consultation on how the assessment system might work,⁷⁷ but they were unable to produce, until the very end of February, decisions on how it would.⁷⁸

An extensive – some might say bewildering – range of information was usable, including mock exams, coursework, other work completed by pupils, essays, in-class tests and tests provided by the exam boards – although the use of these would not be compulsory. The boards were to provide examples of past questions and would conduct their own assessment of how accurately schools were grading pupils – but on a sample basis. As late as 9 March, as schools were returning, Nick Gibb, the school standards minister, was promising “an enormous amount of guidance” still to come from the exam boards on “how to assess a grade, grade descriptors and so on”.⁷⁹

Sir Jon Coles had been the department’s nominee to an Ofqual “recovery committee” that was disbanded following the decision, once again, to cancel exams. As Ofqual’s final guidance came out in February, he said that the government was desperate not to be accused of having an algorithm, and not to be seen to be introducing “exams by the back door”. But that meant “no common assessment taken under standard conditions”. Systems of moderation, he argued, “by definition require common tests or tasks undertaken under common conditions.” Without some use of past data and with a position of “no exams by the back door ... we have no way of ensuring fairness.”

The risk was “an outcome in August much worse than last year”.⁸⁰ Gibb said that in the consultation over assessment the clear view had been that exam board tests should be optional, not mandatory. “We didn’t want there to be an exam by the back door if it was mandatory – that was the fear.”⁸¹

With it becoming inevitable that schools would use different methods – some using formal tests, though to differing degrees, and some not, for example – the Commons Education Committee expressed fears about a “wild west” of inconsistent decisions and grade inflation.⁸² The lack of any pre-planning meant that even by the time the nominal exam period was over many pupils were still uncertain about precisely how they were being assessed.

Time alone, and publication of the exam results in the second week of August, will reveal whether this year’s outcome is any more acceptable than last year’s, and what impact that will have on university admissions. There is some evidence⁸³ that the more selective universities are making fewer offers to avoid another over-large intake in the face of teacher-assessed grades.⁸⁴ And having switched from one extreme to the other – from using an algorithm to adjust grades to relying more or less entirely on teacher assessments – there is a worry among some that teachers “have been set up to fail”, that they will be blamed for the yet greater grade inflation that many believe is on its way.⁸⁵

Conclusion

It is impossible not to have both sympathy and understanding for the Department for Education (DfE) and its ministers at the start of the pandemic. They were operating amid a sea of uncertainty that made decision making extremely challenging. It was not the fault of the department that, like the rest of government, the preparations it did have were for the wrong sort of pandemic – one for influenza, not for a novel coronavirus that transmits asymptotically.

A commendably swift decision was taken at the start on the definition of key workers whose children could be in school. The department insisted that schools remain open to vulnerable children and worked hard, with councils, to ensure, as far as possible in very challenging circumstances, that these children remained in touch with social workers and teachers. The supply of laptops for remote learning was, perhaps unavoidably, slower than anyone would have liked. But well over a million have been provided and are likely to have a lasting effect on the education of the recipients. Support for remote learning, in terms of resources for both schools and parents, improved over time, even if, inevitably, school closures have led to much lost learning. A National Audit Office survey of studies by its equivalents in 24, mainly European, countries found that most were largely unprepared for widespread disruption of schooling, and they generally adopted similar approaches to the DfE – although those where digital education was already an established part of the school system found the switch to online learning easier.⁸⁶

But many difficulties were to arise from the government's handling of schools during the pandemic. A highly centralised approach to dealing with 24,000 schools. Tensions between No.10 and DfE. A refusal to trust local authorities and a failure to engage effectively with them, and their directors of public health, in ways that might have allowed a more nuanced and better response. Dreadful communications. Repeated declarations that schools would open or close, or that exams would be held – despite the evident uncertainties – until reality struck. The result was U-turn after U-turn, with pupils, parents and teachers left bewildered and floundering time and again.

After the shambles at the beginning of January 2021, when many primary schools were opened and then told to close again on the same day, some lessons do appear to have been learnt. We heard, for example, that engagement with education ministers has improved. With better advance notice and planning, the return to school in March this year went reasonably smoothly. An approach driven rather more by 'data than dates' led to the uncertainties being shared more clearly with the public, when judged against the 'cast-iron' announcements of 2020 that this or that would happen.

As the rise of the Delta variant through the spring and summer has seen schools and local authorities take individual decisions to reinstate mask-wearing or to switch to online learning as teachers and pupils were required to isolate in growing numbers, ministers appeared to accept that local decisions did need to be made, without threatening legal action.

But the fact remains that much could have been handled better. The biggest single failure has to be the refusal to make contingency plans over the summer and autumn of 2020, the biggest impact of which was the failure to have anything in place to handle the second cancellation of exams in 2021.

It was put to us forcefully that DfE could not have done that on its own. A contingency plan would involve acknowledging that there could be further lockdowns (as happened), that schools might have to close again (as happened) and that exams might have to be cancelled (as happened) – and that acknowledgment would be required not just from DfE but across government, and from No.10 in particular. In the summer of 2020, however, the prime minister was holding out the prospect of “significant return to normality by Christmas” even as scientific advisers warned of “a very significant chance” that the virus will “come back in force”⁸⁷ As one official put it:

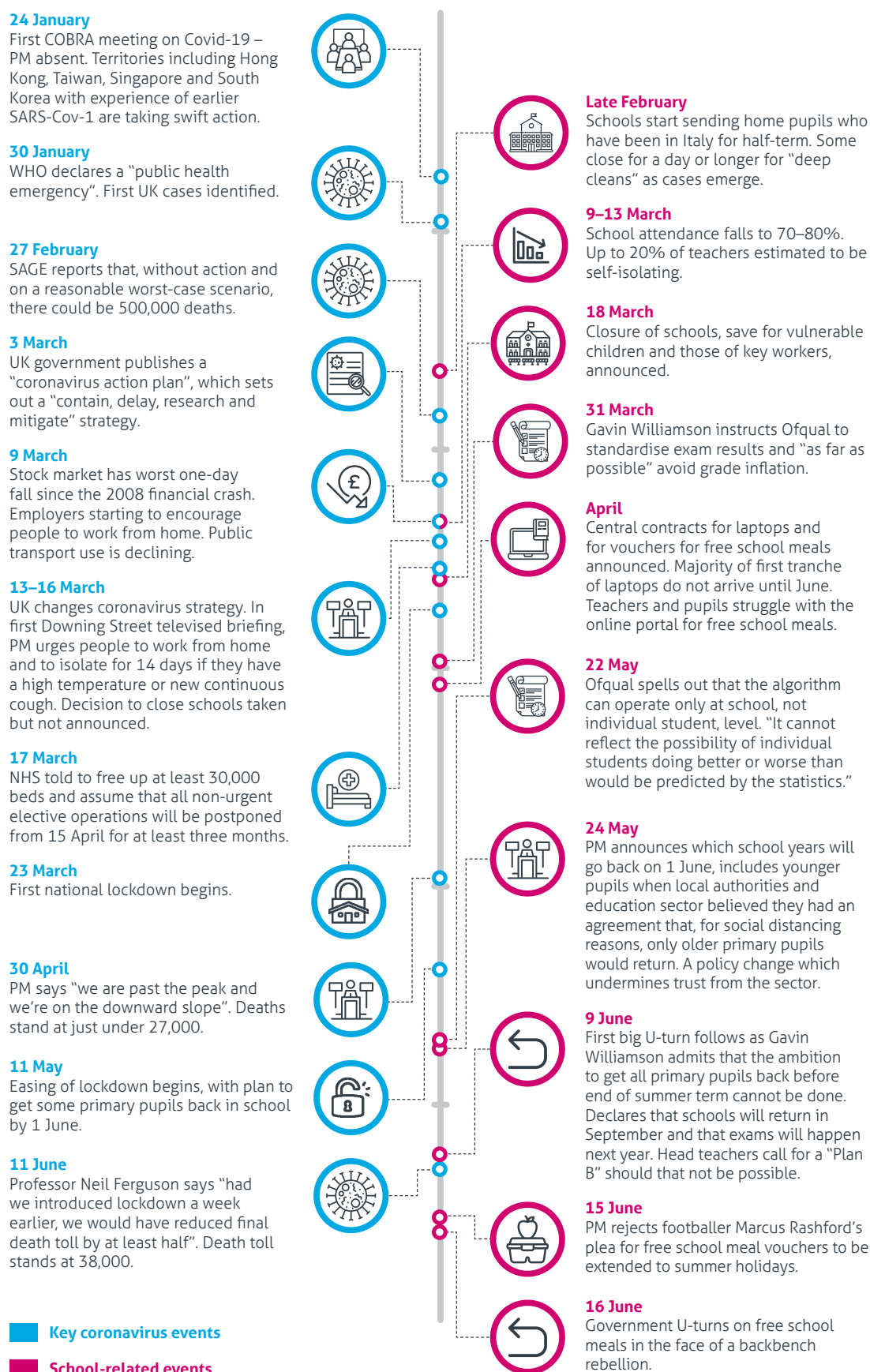
“The key thing here is that the centre of government needs to be completely open with the electorate that it is planning future scenarios for future waves of coronavirus. To do this there needs to be a commonly held set of planning assumptions – from worst-case scenarios to best. These detailed models should be shared with departments and then by departments with their key stakeholders, so that people can work together on contingency plans. With that should go a clear RACI model [responsible, accountable, consulted and informed] so that everyone is clear who is responsible, who is accountable, who gets consulted and who is informed, with clear delivery chains, so that if the centre wants something to happen, they then know how to make it happen, and they are clear on what should be done locally and what nationally.

“Crucially, the fact that there is contingency planning should be briefed to parliament and the media in a transparent way that does not overplay or underplay the risks, but which does make clear that the government is doing what anyone would expect a sensible government to be doing.”

And on the issue of the education department’s capacity to make contingency plans, we also heard this. “I know civil servants are very busy. But there is more resource than just civil servants. There are a lot of people in this system who have been desperate to be involved in that contingency planning and could have brought a lot of expertise to it. It is a fundamental issue about the way government has worked throughout this.”

Annex 1

Figure 1 **Timeline of key coronavirus and school-related events in the UK, Jan 2020–Aug 2021**



17 July

PM holds out prospect of "significant return to normality by Christmas" as Sir Patrick Vallance warns of "a very significant chance" that the virus will "come back in force".



July

Repeated private warnings become much more public that exam results may well be "a car crash".



4 August

Scottish A-level results published with a quarter of grades downgraded by their algorithm.



11 August

Scotland U-turns, substituting results with the better of calculated or teacher-assessed grades. Nicola Sturgeon absolves the Scottish Qualifications Authority of blame: "This is ministers' responsibility." Williamson insists England's approach will be "fundamentally fair".



12 August

Williamson promises a "triple lock" of calculated grades, exams in the autumn or results based on a valid mock – unknown what a "valid" mock would be in these circumstances.



13 August

English A-results published with 40% of teacher assessments downgraded. Williamson gives "cast iron guarantee" that England will not follow Scotland into the same U-turn.



15 August

Williamson says "no U-turn, no change ... this is it".



17 August

Williamson U-turns, allowing pupils the better of the calculated or teacher-assessed grade. Blames Ofqual for the debacle. University admissions in turmoil.



19 August

Faced with a draft resignation letter from the chair of Ofqual, Williamson shifts. DfE declares "full confidence" in Ofqual and its leadership.



25 August

Sally Collier, chief executive of Ofqual, resigns.



26 August

Jonathan Slater, DfE permanent secretary, steps down after PM says the department needs "fresh official leadership". Calls for Williamson to resign mount, and there are continued calls for a Plan B if schools have to close and exams are cancelled again.

■ Key coronavirus events

■ School-related events

21 September

SAGE recommends two-week 'circuit breaker' lockdown perhaps to coincide with half-term, but PM rejects it. Opts for tiered restrictions instead.

30 October

Month-long national lockdown announced to "save Christmas" – a fortnight after PM says it would be "the height of absurdity".

29 November

PM announces plans to let three households bubble together for five days over Christmas. Johnson says "every reason" to believe "the worst is nearly behind us". Deaths stand at just under 60,000. The Alpha or Kent variant, first detected in September, is on the rise.

8 December

First UK patient receives coronavirus vaccine.

19 December

One third of England is put into highest level of restrictions short of a full lockdown. Only households outside tier 4 area allowed to mix on Christmas Day.

4 January

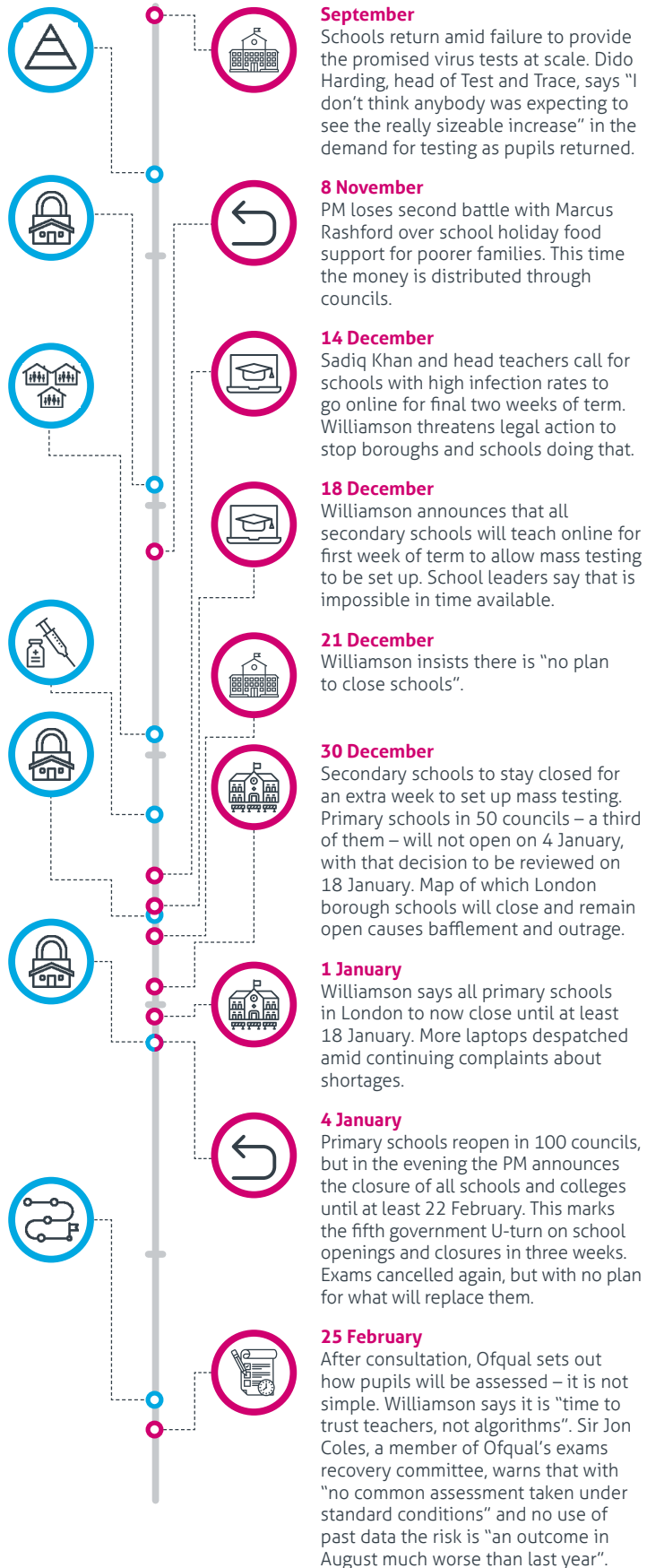
PM announces the most severe national lockdown since March 2020. Schools and colleges again close for all but vulnerable children and those of key workers. Johnson says that "parents whose children were in school today may reasonably ask why we did not take this decision sooner".

22 February

UK government publishes a four-stage roadmap to ease restrictions, with all due to be lifted by 21 June. PM promises to be driven by "data, not dates".

■ Key coronavirus events

■ School-related events



29 March

Step 1 of UK government's roadmap goes ahead – 'rule of six' or two households allowed to meet outdoors. 'Stay at home' order ends but people encouraged to stay local.



12 April

Step 2 of UK government's roadmap goes ahead – non-essential retail reopens, with outdoor table service at hospitality venues.



17 May

Step 3 of UK government's roadmap goes ahead – 'rule of six' or two households allowed to meet indoors. Seated indoor hospitality resumes. Children's play areas reopen along with hotels and B&Bs.



14 June

Lifting of all, or almost all, restrictions postponed until 19 July amid rising infections. UK deaths stand at 128,000.



Vaccinations extended to over-18s. More than 35m adults have had first dose in England (nearly 42m in UK), over 60% of the population, with over 25m receiving second dose (32m UK), approximately 45% of the population.



Mid-June to July

Delta variant producing more cases in schools, with growing numbers of classes, year groups and teachings having to self-isolate.

19 July

Lifting of most restrictions in England.



10 August

A-level results for 2021 due.



12 August

GCSE results for 2021 due.



■ Key coronavirus events

■ School-related events

Source: Institute for Government analysis.

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