I welcome the decision of the Education Select Committee to host an evidence session, examining factors leading to the rise in knife crime. Thank you for taking the time to explore this complex and most troubling issues in depth. Clearly, this is one of the most pressing issues facing young people – and the services which support them – today.

To support the evidence session, I wanted to write to you setting out some points on this important topic, what the Department for Education is doing, in collaboration with the Home Office and other relevant Departments, and a summary of the latest evidence we have on the links between knife crime and school attendance and exclusions.

I saw your recent article on exclusions in The Times, in many ways, we have reached similar conclusions on this matter, including the need for high standards in the alternative provision (AP) sector so that if a child is excluded, it is a new start for them, to receive a good education which meets their needs. That is why the department has launched the AP Reform Programme in 2018, funded £4m to develop best practice through the AP Innovation Fund and have been reviewing exclusions practice through the Timpson review.

However, as you recognise, I am clear that it is crucial we get underneath all the reasons for why knife crime is rising. This issue is far more complex than one of exclusions alone and I welcome the committee stating its wishes to consider the range of potential, and sometimes overlapping, causes.

The figures show that 3% of knife crime attacks are perpetrated by someone who had been permanently excluded in the past year; four in five knife crime offences are carried out by adults (aged 18 or over), and the increase in knife crime is occurring across all age groups. And indeed reviews of the evidence to date have found no causal link between a child being excluded and then going onto commit or be a victim of knife crime.
I am clear that the power to exclude a pupil is an important one for head teachers and that permanent exclusion (expulsion) is something that can be used as a last resource, when other measures have failed taking into account the interest and safety of the individual and other students and staff; teachers do not enter education with the intention of excluding children. In Scotland exclusions have been going down but, sadly, knife crime has risen there too. Edward Timpson is currently completing his review into the use of exclusions in schools, and I am looking forward to considering his recommendations.

While there is no evidence of a causal link between exclusion and crime, we should recognise that children not in mainstream schools are more likely to become a victim or a perpetrator of crime or violence. That is why I am committed to improving the quality of alternative provision for children who have been excluded from mainstream schools, to make sure that they continue to receive an excellent quality of education and a supportive and nurturing environment that allows them to stay safe. As you know 83% of AP settings are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, and we must ensure that quality provision is universal.

Moreover, a bigger concern is those children who are persistently absent. Four in five knife crime offenders under 18 have been persistently absent in at least one of the last five years. I think it goes without saying that children being in school is absolutely crucial, not only for those at risk of harm, exploitation and knife crime but for all of our children. The way we will achieve this is by working together across the police, social services, teachers, health workers and local authorities (LAs). We have equipped schools and LAs with a range of sanctions for absence and are currently reviewing the changes to Pupil Registration regulations that we made in 2016.

Sadly, in many cases of children persistently absent, school attendance may not be top of the priority list for parents who are experiencing issues such as mental health problems, domestic violence or substance misuse. It is these children who are most at risk of being pulled into crime or becoming a victim of it. It is also these children who are most likely to be considered ‘in need’ and in contact with a social worker. Children in need are three times more likely to be persistently absent than other children - we are currently undertaking the Children in Need Review, to understand what more is needed to break the cycle of disadvantage for these children.

We also know that special education needs, community factors and wider deprivation are also linked to an increased likelihood of being involved in knife crime. That is why we are strengthening multi-agency safeguarding, investing £84m into social care innovation and taking targeted action to tackle exploitation.

Given all of this, I have a clear view that the Government’s response to serious violence and knife crime must be a cross-departmental effort. Our education and care services have a big part to play here, both in terms of educating and protecting children at risk of involvement in knife crime, but also, alongside health, community services, employment, housing and public safety policies, as part of the longer-term preventive action to stop people turning to crime later in life. Put simply, we also must not forget the huge impact good schools with great
teachers can have on helping vulnerable children.

I look forward to seeing the outcome of the committee’s evidence session and working with you on supporting our children and young people in the future.

Damian Hinds
Secretary of State for Education