



## FUNDING: THE COLD REALITY OF FRONTLINE VS BOTTOM LINE



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## RISE ADVISERS: 'BEST OF BEST' OR 'CLIPBOARD CARRIERS'?



Page 5 and 6

## WHY MY MEMBERS WERE NOT CONVINCED BY SIR MARTYN



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# The 'green shoots' of a recruitment recovery?



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## SCHOOLS BILL GIVES 'GET OUT OF JAIL CARD' TO 'INCOMPETENT' LEADERS, SAYS EX TORY MINISTER

- Lords take aim at schools bill as reforms put back on the political agenda
- But skills minister slams use of language from 'complacent' Tory peers
- Labour makes UTC carve out from demand to follow national curriculum

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

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SCHOOLS  
WEEK

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The government is ramping up the rhetoric on its school improvement teams. Announcing more advisers this week, the Department for Education hailed taking “leaps forward in plans to drive up school standards”.

The school improvement consultants – mostly from trusts – were the “best of the best”, education secretary Bridget Phillipson said. They “can be the spark that turns around the life chances of tens of thousands of children”.

That’s quite the billing.

As always with government policy, the political rhetoric is far less important than the on-the-ground delivery.

So how is the latter going? We’ve taken a detailed look this week (pages 5 and 6).

Quite frankly, it’s still early days.

Advisers are enthusiastic about making a difference – and they even got a pep talk from policy supremo Sir Michael Barber.

But many of the advisers work for trusts that themselves have ‘stuck’ schools. One of the issues here is the government’s definition of a ‘stuck’ school – which means prior Ofsted grades are included even where trusts have since taken over schools.

However, privately, some CEOs are

already questioning the ability of the RISE teams to deliver better improvement solutions.

Despite the government saying it wants improvement “done with, not done to” schools, these relationships are sometimes going to be difficult.

Also – a quarter of the advisers are in trusts that are already represented on powerful academy headteacher boards. Was this a factor in the hiring decisions? How are any potential conflicts managed?

Many will remember the introduction of regional school commissioners back in 2014. Without much clarity around their purpose and rules governing their operation – schools were left confused about who they were accountable to.

The sector will be hoping Labour has done its homework to ensure similar mistakes aren’t repeated.

But even with clear roles and responsibilities, does the practice of sending in advisers to improve schools even work?

Many in the sector don’t think so, and two Conservative academies ministers made that point loud and clear this week (see page 7).

## Most read online this week:



- 1** **79 schools withdraw from breakfast clubs trial**
- 2** **Rise in teacher applicants across most subjects, as targets cut 20%**
- 3** **Schools have 28% of budgets shaved off by academy trust ‘GAG pooling’**
- 4** **School support staff offered 3.2% pay rise**
- 5** **STRB recommends teacher pay rise ‘close to 4%’ – reports**

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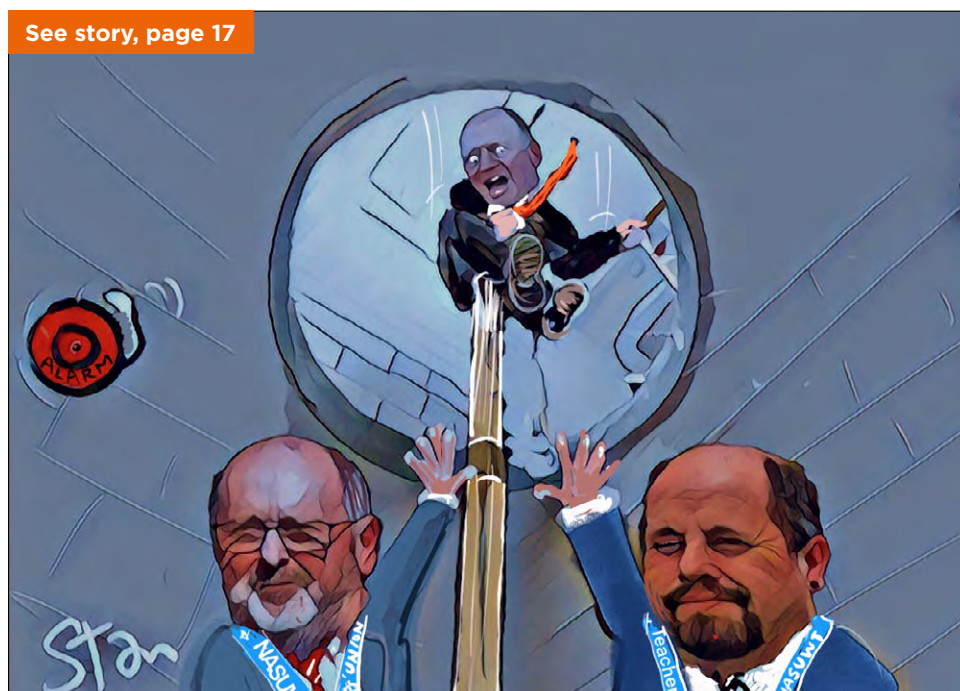
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See story, page 17





## NEWS

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## EHRC guidance causes trans toilet trouble for schools

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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Schools need more clarity over toilet arrangements for trans pupils, lawyers and leaders have said, after what one described as an “absurd” guidance update on Friday.

It comes as new data suggests as many as one in four schools has mixed-sex toilets – and could face having to invest in new facilities to meet amended rules.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) published a non-statutory “interim update” on Friday after a Supreme Court ruling that a woman is defined as a biological woman (a person born female) for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010.

The body plans to update its statutory code of conduct, but this will be open to consultation so is unlikely to emerge soon.

Schools were already required by law to provide separate single-sex toilets for boys and girls over the age of 8, and single-sex changing facilities for boys and girls over 11.

The EHRC’s interim update states that “pupils who identify as trans girls should not be permitted to use the girls’ toilet or changing facilities, and pupils who identify as trans boys should not be permitted to use the boys’ toilet or changing facilities”.

It adds that “suitable alternative provisions may be required”, but does not add further detail.

Tomas Thurogood-Hyde, the director of corporate services at Astrea Academy Trust, said schools “rely on guidance from multiple sources, so it is important that key bodies, such as the DfE and Ofsted, are aligned and speak with one voice.

“The EHRC’s guidance may raise more questions ... it is important that any guidance is well-considered so that it helps schools navigate this territory.”

Lawyers also have concerns. Clare Wigzell, an associate at Stone King, said the interim guidance “confirms the existing law regarding single-sex toilets and changing rooms for pupils is to be applied on the basis of biological sex”.

But it “leaves schools without any additional clarity regarding how they also ensure that trans pupils are safeguarded and not subjected



to unfavourable treatment as a result, saying merely that ‘suitable alternative provisions may be required’.

“It is hoped that the DfE and/or EHRC will clarify how schools also ensure that they meet their duties under the Equality Act in terms of the protected characteristic of gender reassignment, and their duty to safeguard pupils.”

Philip Wood, a principal associate in the education team at Browne Jacobson, said that without “clear and consistent” guidance “different schools are likely to have been taking different approaches”.

Those with approaches that conflicted with the ruling would need to consider alternatives – such as using accessible toilets as gender-neutral facilities – in “a sensitive and pragmatic way”.

Teacher Tapp found schools had a range of approaches, including single-sex toilet blocks with doors dividing them from corridors (56 per cent) and without doors (30 per cent). These would likely be compliant with the guidance.

But about 25 per cent had mixed toilet blocks, which likely would not comply.

Baroness Jacqui Smith, an education minister, told the House of Lords on Thursday that the EHRC’s update was a “snapshot reflection rather than full guidance”.

“The application of the Supreme Court ruling to different services and settings is complex.

It requires careful work to ensure we provide clarity for a wide range of varied service providers of different kinds and sizes.”

The guidance for school staff seems to be even less clear.

The EHRC said that in workplaces, trans women “should not be permitted to use the women’s facilities and trans men should not be permitted to use the men’s facilities”.

But “in some circumstances the law also allows trans women not to be permitted to use the men’s facilities, and trans men not to be permitted to use the women’s facilities”.

However, “where facilities are available to both men and women, trans people should not be put in a position where there are no facilities for them to use”.

One school leader, who did not wish to be named, said the EHRC had “painted an absurd picture”.

“As written, this interim advice tells us that a trans man may be refused access to a men’s service for being biologically female, whilst at the same time refused the women’s service for appearing male.

“Not only that, but providers of both services mustn’t leave him with nowhere to go. The commission has had months to prepare for this outcome, which the interim guidance doesn’t reflect.”

The DfE has said it will publish full guidance later this year.

## ANALYSIS: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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# RISE advisers: 'best of the best' or 'clipboard carrying bureaucrats'?

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

The government says it has taken "leaps forward in plans to drive up school standards" with more school improvement advisers named this week. So, who are they, how will they operate, and will it all work? Schools Week investigates ...

## Who are the 'best of best' advisers?

Regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE) teams will commission support for 'stuck' schools from bodies such as trusts, councils and federations.

This week, 45 new advisers were announced to join the 20 who have been in post since the start of February.

Our analysis suggests 55 (85 per cent) are from trusts. Seven (11 per cent) work for local authorities, their school improvement arms or council-run schools, while three (5 per cent) are either consultants or from school-led organisations.

Most (52 per cent) are women.

But there is also a big overlap with headteacher advisory boards. More than one in four trusts with RISE advisers also have someone advising regional directors.

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, said this week that "no child should be spending precious days, let alone years, in schools that are underperforming.

"Our new RISE teams, made up of the best of the best in school improvement, can be the spark that turns around the life chances of tens of thousands of children."

But our analysis suggests 18 of the trusts and five of the councils involved with RISE have 46 so-called "stuck" schools, those rated 'requires improvement' following an earlier below-good inspection grade and now in line for support.

## 'Weak managers avoiding reckoning'

And the wider approach of advisers driving improvement has also been criticised.

Lord Nash, a former academies minister, told Parliament on Thursday the teams "will be



## 'They will brandish clipboards and run around offering advice'

ineffective". Advisers were "temporary" with "no skin in the game ... the complete opposite to a MAT".

One of his successors, Lord Agnew, labelled the advisers "65 people brandishing clipboards who will run around the country offering advice".

"If weak managers can avoid a reckoning through procrastination without penalty, that is what they will do. It's the Damoclean sword of consequences that will drive change in failing schools.

"It seems you're not prepared to allow the hard edge of intervention to sweep out mediocrity and failure."

But skills minister Baroness Smith rebuked the language used, adding: "I'm not sure that noble lords in this place want to be referring to successful school leaders as clipboard carrying bureaucrats, as some have."

## How they will work...

The first 20 advisers have been working with 32 schools that were previously in line for structural change. The expanded team is set to start working with more than 200.

RISE advisers – most of whom are devoting two days a week to the role – have told Schools Week those in line for the targeted support will initially be contacted by DfE officials.

Advisers are then expected to arrange an initial meeting with leaders, before visiting the school again.

Using Ofsted reports and figures on attainment, behaviour and attendance, they will then produce action plans detailing the support needed, and which trusts or local authorities are best placed to help. Officials have final sign-off.

The teams have been allocated £20 million, with up to £100,000 per school.

Paul Haigh, a Sheffield headteacher appointed to the Yorkshire and Humber RISE team in February, and one of "six or seven" working in the region, is working with four schools.

He expects to have completed all his schools' action plans by the end of next week.

"This is not a wham, bam, thank you ma'am process that is done to you – it's done with the recipient schools. Doing it too fast means you'll trip over yourself and do it wrong."

Haigh added that advisers could also recommend against brokering support for schools, should they appear to be on an upward trajectory. In such cases, they could arrange termly meetings "to see if we still think they're still on track to get 'good'".

## 'Done with, not done to'

Some of the new recruits have already been

Continued on next page

## ANALYSIS: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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Sir Michael Barber

assigned schools, too. Tim Coulson, the chief executive of the Unity Schools Partnership, has been given three.

He expects to contact them next week and to submit his recommendations in the next four weeks. Coulson will sound out officials already working with advisory boards to help him decide which trusts or local authorities to broker support from.

Schools Week understands all 65 advisers were invited to an "induction" event at Church House in Westminster before the Easter break.

They were addressed by Phillipson, school standards tsar Sir Kevan Collins, DfE officials and Sir Michael Barber, the head of the Prime Minister's delivery unit under Tony Blair.

According to one adviser, Barber detailed the "work in education over time" and compared this with "international approaches".

Barber is now advising Number 10 on delivering its "missions".

Phillipson and Collins stressed the process of brokering targeted support had to be "done with and not done to", the adviser added.

### First improvement partners announced

The DfE said this week that "the first schools we began working with in February have started to be paired with supporting organisations, including high-quality [MATs]".

These include the Mulberry Schools Trust, L.E.A.D Academy Trust and Northern Education Trust (NET).

A full list is expected to be published next week. But school improvement plans will not be made public.

Haigh noted on his "first day in a school" he would ask: "What schools or trusts or federations do you admire as you can see they're having success in a similar context to you?"



Bridget Phillipson

## 'This is not a wham, bam, thank you ma'am process'

This will allow civil servants to "test the water to see if they have availability or capacity" and can inform decisions around which organisations to broker support from.

Andrew Jordon, NET's deputy chief executive, said his trust was selected to work with two schools before Easter. There will be "an initial assessment ... to see what the best way forward is, and that hasn't happened yet".

He suspected the MAT was paired with his trust "because of its track record [in schools] with [a high proportion of] white British, high levels of pupil premium, deprivation".

Haigh said he will be "quality assuring" progress made at his schools through termly meetings against targets set by the incoming supporting organisations.

### How RISE could grow

DfE analysis suggests the schools the RISE teams are now supporting have spent an average of 6.6 years rated below 'good' by Ofsted.

This amounts to "a child spending their whole primary or secondary school years in an underperforming school". Forty-two have been considered "stuck" for more than 11 years.

When asked if more advisers may be hired, the DfE said it will "will review the capacity

we need to support RISE schools" as the programme expands.

The government is also proposing to give RISE teams the power to "engage with schools", including those with "large year-on-year declines" in results.

But the National Governance Association said it "would be opposed to any intervention based on a single year's performance data, where unrepresentative issues with the cohort or its teachers could have a major impact". It suggested using a "three-year average ... as a minimum".

From 2026, schools deemed "requiring significant improvement" would also face "mandatory" intervention from RISE teams. But the Confederation of School Trusts said a review of RISE effectiveness should happen first.

The definition of a 'stuck' school also risks putting trusts in an "unenviable position". They will either have "to move the most broken schools in the system to good (or equivalent) within two years, or otherwise choose not to take on the school in the first place".

You can view the full list of advisers [here](#)





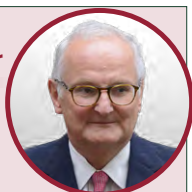
## IN PARLIAMENT

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## Oh Lord: Peers now take aim at schools bill

Labour's schools bill will give a "get out of jail card" to "incompetent" school leaders, and place government at risk of "endless litigation and judicial reviews", former academies ministers have warned. The children's wellbeing and schools bill is now moving through the House of Lords. Much of the debate and criticism focused on Labour's plans to row back academy freedoms.

But skills minister Baroness Smith said the reforms "make vital and practical" changes that will deliver "tangible improvements for every child as a result". She also confirmed the university technical colleges and studio schools will be exempt from following the national curriculum.

**LORD AGNEW** Tory academies minister and Inspiration Trust chair**'Back to the education badlands'**

The bill will "plunge the education system back into the bad lands" of 20 years ago and "face a stormy passage" through the Lords, said Agnew.

"Ambiguity" over academisation for failing schools will "present a get-out-of-jail card for the incompetent management of those schools".

"Organisations rot from the head down. Schools don't fail because of the teachers but

because of the people who manage them."

He accused Labour of "essentially condemning children to a failed education. It seems you're not prepared to allow the hard edge of intervention to sweep out mediocrity and failure.

"The communities that you claim on your benches to represent [disadvantaged ones] will be the ones thrown under the bus under a senseless ideology."

**LORD NASH** Tory academies minister and Future Academies chair**'Endless litigations and judicial reviews'**

While Labour "invented the academy movement [they] now seem intent on dismantling it", Nash said.

He is "concerned about the clauses taking micro-managing powers to the centre. Over-riding funding agreements, which are contracts, is never a good look."

Councils gaining the "ability to change PANS" and "weak academisation intervention powers" mean the government is "setting

itself up for endless litigation and judicial reviews. Good luck with that."

Legislation has been "rushed out without any consultation" with leaders who have "no desire for it", he added.

While the government "would be well advised to scrap it and start again", he urges ministers to "take a constructive approach on amendments".

**BARONESS MORRIS** Former Labour education secretary**'Schools must behave in right way'**

"If we want every school to be a good school," Morris said, then "we've got to make sure that they don't achieve this by behaving in a way that makes it more difficult for other schools to succeed."

She welcomed the proposal to allow

councils to challenge academy admission numbers "not because I want to take away the freedoms, but because those can be exercised in a way that makes it impossible for the school down the road to flourish and succeed".

**BARONESS BOUSTED** Former trade union boss**'Broad curriculum needs to be an entitlement'**

Bousted challenged Tory claims of "gains" made during their time in office, pointing out the "Forgotten Third scandal" and funding squeeze.

"For a party that reduced spending in schools in such a savage way in real terms over a decade, the idea that they would support unfilled places throughout the country in order for academies to determine their pupil intakes is frankly unbelievable.

"Surely this is a prime example of an ideology that supports structures, not standards."

She said curriculum reforms will ensure a "broad and balanced curriculum" is an "entitlement", and all teachers having to be qualified is a "social justice issue".

The bill is "ambitious, positive for all our children, is proportionate and necessary".

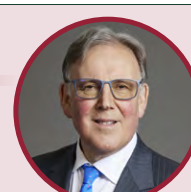
**LORD KNIGHT** Ex-Labour academies minister and E-ACT trust chair**'Refer MAT executive salaries to teacher pay board'**

Academies have "by and large worked well", Knight said, but this is "not because of the freedoms promised, it is much more due to strong governance and effective leadership".

But he had "concerns" that "unfettered" use of new powers to issue compliance orders to academies "could interfere with good governance".

He also suggested "exploring whether the pay of senior MAT executives should be referred to the STRB [the teacher pay body] so trust remuneration committees receive guidance to prevent pay inflation".

The bill puts "children's interests, not structures or ideology at the centre of reform", he added.

**LORD FINK** Trustee Ark Schools**'When did centralisation ever lead to innovation?'**

The Conservative peer said the schools bill "does not strengthen our system: it centralises it, homogenises it and risks extinguishing the very freedoms that made academies and vast parts of our schools system successful in the first place". Fink also questioned "when did centralisation ever lead to innovation?"

"Academies have done more for social mobility than any single government policy over the last 25 years and it was initiated by New Labour. We mustn't let political short-term theatre dismantle the long-term and cross-party progress we've made in education policy."

## LONG READ: RECRUITMENT

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## Is the recruitment crisis showing 'green shoots' of recovery?

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

The education secretary says that a rise in teacher trainee applicants and improved retention rates show that her government is "turning the tide" on the recruitment crisis. Is that the case? Schools Week investigates ...

The Labour government has had little good news for its schools agenda. But new analysis this week has provided a double boost for promises to solve teacher recruitment woes.

**The recruitment rise**

The number of applicants accepted on to postgraduate initial teacher training (PGITT) courses for September has risen by 8 per cent to 18,309 this year, up from 16,950 at the same stage last year.

There has been a near 12 per cent rise in secondary teaching, marking an increase in all but two subjects (English and classics).

Unlike last year, the growth is also mainly from applicants based in England.

And increases have been particularly high in STEM subjects – with rises of almost 50 per cent in computing and physics.

The rise for primary trainee teachers is less, at 2.4 per cent. But Jack Worth, an education economist at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), said forecasts for this September were "now looking much more positive".

He said the rise could be down to retention payments "bedding in and acting as a recruitment boost", a cooling labour market and the government's 5.5 pay boost last year.

**The targets cut**

The government this week also revealed it was cutting its recruitment targets for next year by 19 per cent, which amounts to nearly 6,500 fewer secondary teachers.

This was because of increased recruitment, "rapidly falling" pupil numbers and "more favourable forecasts" for teacher retention.

Modelling shows 2,500 more teachers are expected to stay in the classroom over the next three years compared with previous estimates, the Department for Education said.

But targets for subjects such as physics, maths and chemistry – all of which have suffered from serious under-recruitment in recent years – have



been cut.

Chemistry has been cut by 40 per cent after "more favourable retention and returner" forecasts. Physics has been cut by 37 per cent.

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the school leaders' union NAHT, said the cuts were "surprising" as pupils numbers at secondary schools were set to rise for a few years.

"It's hard to see why targets would be reduced. We need to understand more about how these targets have been calculated."

Worth described the changes as "hefty", but pointed out that secondary targets had "in general been unusually high in the last few years".

Overall, it means primary recruitment is expected to beat its target next year, after missing last year's by a record 12 per cent.

Meanwhile secondary recruitment is on track to hit about 86 per cent of its target – the highest since the 2020-21 Covid recruitment boom.

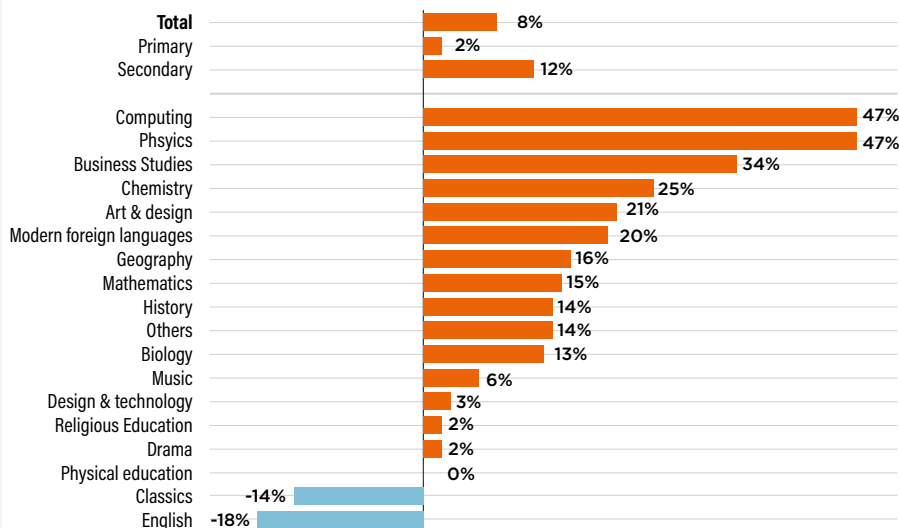
**'Green shoots' of change**

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, described the figures as the "green shoots" of Labour's "plan for change".

"Following last year's 5.5 per cent pay award, and with hundreds of millions of pounds being invested to help us turn the tide, I'm determined to restore teaching as the attractive, prestigious profession it should be," she said.

John Howson, the director of DataForEducation, suggested the "decade-long teacher supply problem may be finally coming to an end".

But key contributors were underfunded pay

**Change in accepted applicants to ITT in England, Apr 2025 vs 2024**

Source: NFER analysis of DfE figures

SCHOOLS WEEK

Continued on next page



## LONG READ: RECRUITMENT

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awards squeezing pupil-teacher-ratios, falling school rolls and a “tightening labour market in graduate level jobs”.

Emma Hollis, the chief executive of the National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT), said people were feeling uncertain about the economic future.

“The sector does traditionally do well when there is economic uncertainty, because teaching is seen as a safe job in a difficult job market.”

And while numbers may be improving, others are still concerned about the quality of applicants.

Paul Stone, the chief executive of the Discovery Schools Academies Trust, has seen a “pronounced” rise in applicants to his SCITT.

“Graduates are coming out of university realising they haven’t got a job and [there are] not many graduate schemes. We can’t keep up with the interviews,” he added.

### The retention challenge

But he is concerned some of those graduates are “treading water” and may “sign up to get a bursary for the year to train” with no intention of “really going into teaching”.

The government estimates that nearly 25 per cent of the trainees who finished courses in the 2022-23 academic year were not teaching in state schools within 16 months.

Meanwhile, a third of new teachers leave within five years.

The DfE budgeted about £700 million on financial and non-financial recruitment and retention initiatives, not including pay rises.

Of this, £390 million related to financial incentives such as training bursaries and retention payments.

Worth said while bursaries to boost recruitment in key subjects were “impactful”, few had changed since last year – yet applications in those subjects still rose.

However, the bursary was halved for English, which Worth said was the “main factor” behind the 15 per cent drop in accepted applicants in the subject.

### One ‘good’ year isn’t enough

Despite the positive changes, he warned that schools are “not out the woods”.

“A single year of meeting recruitment targets would not be enough to reverse the cumulative damage from many years of under-recruitment.”

A National Audit Office (NAO) report on Wednesday found 1,500 vacancies across secondary schools and 2,500 across colleges in 2022-23. Schools also had 1,700 temporarily filled posts.

And the NAO estimated 1,600 more

## RECRUITMENT IN NUMBERS

1

Number of times DfE has met its secondary teacher recruitment targets in past 10 years

15%

Rise in secondary school kids since 2015



£700m

DfE spend on recruitment and retention schemes last year

1,600

Extra secondary teachers needed by 2028 to meet growing pupil numbers

3%

Rise in secondary teachers over the same period



14%

Trainee teachers in 2022-23 who didn’t join a state school within 16 months

10%

Real-terms difference in education sector pay compared to 2010 (public sector earnings average is -2.6%)

1/3

Secondary teachers leaving the profession within five years of qualifying

secondary teachers will be needed between 2023 and 2027, with secondary pupil numbers expected to keep rising.

Between 2015-16 and 2023-24, secondary pupil numbers soared 15 per cent up to 3.7 million, while teacher numbers rose by just 3 per cent to 217,500.

As a result, the average number of pupils per teacher increased from 15.1 to 16.9.

James Noble-Rogers, the executive director of the Universities’ Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET), urged the government “to be cautious” as the “proof in the pudding” would be in the final recruitment figures. The figures for 2025-26 will not be published until December.

While improved recruitment and retention should be “celebrated”, Hollis said the government “seems to be relying quite heavily on predictions of higher retention”.

“What I don’t know is...what data is telling them that retention is going to get better?”

DfE said it will consider more sector involvement in its modelling at the next annual review.

### The 6,500 new teacher challenge

Labour also faces a new challenge: delivering its promise to recruit 6,500 new teachers in schools and colleges, a pledge first made in 2021 while the party was in opposition.

There have been few details after its 10 months

in office – apart from it being delivered over the full course of parliament, which ends in 2029, and that numbers will be split across secondary and college sectors.

The NAO report revealed a draft delivery plan was drawn up in November, but the DfE in February “rated its confidence in achieving the pledge as a ‘significant challenge’”.

The extent to which the promise will resolve shortages also depends on how it is split across schools and further education, the spending watchdog said. The latter is facing more severe shortages as rising pupil numbers hit colleges.

The NAO has told the government to publish a full delivery plan for 6,500 new teachers after the multi-year spending review later this spring.

This should set out “objectives, responsibilities, milestones, and how increases will be measured, and subsequently, publicly report on progress”.

The DfE said it “remain[s] committed” to its election pledge of recruiting 6,500 new teachers, with recruitment to PGITT “key”.

But Daniel Kebede, the general secretary of the National Education Union, said recruitment and retention problems would not be solved without “a major and urgent pay correction, alongside significant improvements in workload”.

James Zuccollo, the director for school workforce at the Education Policy Institute, also said the NAO report highlighted “significant shortcomings” in the DfE’s current recruitment and retention strategy.

The NAO urged the government to extend its evidence base for what worked and analyse costs and benefits of initiatives to help decide where to prioritise resources.



John Howson



Emma Hollis



Daniel Kebede

A photograph of a male teacher with grey hair, wearing a dark blue sweater over a light blue shirt, smiling and looking at a young Black female student. The student is wearing a white school shirt and a dark tie, and is holding a red marker, pointing it towards the top right of the frame. They are in a classroom setting with large windows in the background.

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## NEWS: FUNDING

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## MPs tackle Labour on £800m school funding problem

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

Costs will outstrip schools' funding by £800 million this year if improved pay rises for teachers and support staff are approved without extra money.

Ministers faced a barrage of complaints in parliament this week, as the leader of the largest academy trust warned of "ruinous harm" if the pay rises did not attract new funding.

The £800 million additional cost of proposed pay rises is the equivalent of employing more than 13,000 teachers.

The Times reported on Monday that the School Teachers' Review Body had recommended a teacher pay rise "close to 4 per cent" – above the 2.8 per cent ministers previously said would be "appropriate" for 2025-26.

Schools already faced funding some of the lower proposed rise from "efficiencies", with the government confirming this week that there would be "no additional funding for pay if recommended awards exceed what departments can afford".

It also comes after support staff were offered a rise of 3.2 per cent.

**Funding rising '£800m less than costs'**

Luke Sibieta of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said: "If these pay offers are accepted, we estimate that mainstream school costs would go up by nearly 6 per cent in 2025-26.

"For comparison, mainstream school funding is due to go up by 4.3 per cent this year, or about £800 million less than costs.

"In its evidence to the pay review body, the government has assumed that schools could make efficiency savings of just over £500 million to fund for pay awards. That would leave a gap of £300 million that would need to be bridged from somewhere."

Jon Coles, the chief executive of United Learning, the country's largest academy trust, posted on X that funding for his trust was only rising by 0.7 per cent per pupil next year.

Meanwhile, funding for the national insurance rise was "£1.5 million less than its cost".

"So, we would have £10.5 million of unfunded costs. It's no good Treasury waving their hands and saying 'efficiency' – that would be ~400 job losses.



Catherine McKinnell

"Sector wide, that would extrapolate to ruinous harm in the one well-functioning public service: tens of thousands of redundancies."

**Tables turned as Tories slam funding**

In a sign that the issue is causing increasing concern, five of 21 education questions tabled by MPs in Commons on Monday were about funding.

Responding, Catherine McKinnell, the schools minister, accused the Conservatives of leaving a "trail of devastation across our schools, with buildings crumbling and teachers leaving in their droves".

Funding fell in real-terms during much of the Conservatives' time in office between 2010 and 2014, only finally returning to 2010 levels this year.

Richard Holden, a former DfE adviser and the Conservative MP for Basildon and Billericay, said many heads, teachers and support staff had been in touch, worried about school budgets.

The crisis is also politically uncomfortable for Labour, which happily cheered on the unions' School Cuts campaign before the election. The party now find itself in its sights.

Daniel Kebede, the leader of the National Education Union, has vowed to make Labour MPs "pay a high political price through our campaigning in their constituencies" if teachers are denied an increased, fully funded pay rise.

Laura Trott, the shadow education secretary, accused education secretary Bridget

Phillipson of leaving schools "in an impossible funding situation".

"Every MP has headteachers who are stressed beyond belief at how to manage their funding.

"So can the secretary of state guarantee worried headteachers up and down the country that they will not have to make teachers redundant because of her broken promises?"

Labour MPs also voiced concern. Sam Rushworth, the Labour MP for Bishop Auckland, spoke of one school making four teaching assistants redundant.

But he said there was an "elephant in the room". The chief executive of the school's trust received a £30,000 pay increase over the past two years, taking his salary to £275,000.

"That's equivalent of 12 teaching assistants."

Responding to the criticism, McKinnell said Labour made "no apologies for doing what the last government failed to do in office, and the extra money from national insurance contributions means we can protect key educational priorities.

"The party opposite should be honest. What will they cut to pay for our schools?"

The Conservatives' "record in education was dismal", she said.

"School buildings crumbling. Teachers leaving the profession. This is a government focused on returning education back to the centre of public life."



Sam Rushworth



## NEWS: INVESTIGATIONS

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## Academy scandal reports will no longer name offenders

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

The government has all but ruled out naming individuals responsible for academy trust scandals in public investigation reports as it admits to fears that it could be sued.

The Department for Education published five investigation “outcome” reports on Tuesday into academy controversies stretching back 14 years.

The reports revealed one trust spent £26,000 on gift cards for staff. Another flagged conflicts of interests relating to £570,000 spent with a company related to a staff member.

But no identifiable information for the individuals or companies involved were included.

Reports are now “outcomes” of investigations, as opposed to investigation reports.

Susan Acland-Hood, the DfE’s top civil servant, said a review into the government’s investigation policy concluded that “very detailed reports which included named individuals” are “not required to support other organisations to learn lessons” from investigations.

But Lucia Glynn, an academy consultant, said: “When you take on a role as a chief executive, chief financial officer, chair of a board, you are signing up to the Nolan principles.

“They should name names... so those working in the sector know they will be accountable for their decisions.”

**‘Naming individuals not necessary’**

Schools Week revealed in November that the department altered its policy to now only publish investigation “outcomes”.

The first of these, on its eight-year investigation into the now-closed Lilac Sky Schools Trust, was published in October. The report was three pages long.

After our story, the Public Accounts Committee ordered an explanation from the DfE. Members said they were “concerned” the changes “hindered transparency”.

Responding, Acland-Hood said the now-defunct Education and Skills Funding Agency had “assessed that the time and resource to produce a single detailed investigation report and complete the Maxwellisation process [on Lilac Sky]... would be challenging [and] potentially subject to further legal proceedings”. This would



be “disproportionate to the benefits of publishing a detailed report”.

Maxwellisation is when an individual subject to criticism is given the opportunity to respond.

In changing its publication approach, the government “prioritised providing transparency... and enabling other organisations to learn lessons”, Acland-Hood said in a January letter.

She claimed that “including details on individuals is not required to support” others to learn lessons.

But she did say other reports would be “more explicit” in describing the learnings for the sector.

**Lessons learned**

The outcome reports released this week all contained lessons learned sections produced following “prevention analysis exercise[s]”. Analysis by Google Notebook suggests that just over 25 per cent of the reports were devoted to this.

But some are generic.

For instance, the report detailing the “outcomes” of an investigation at the Stephenson (MK) Trust reiterated current academy guidance trusts “must ensure that they make a referral to the [DfE] for prior approval” of novel, contentious and repercussive transactions.

It also stated that chains should ensure spending policies contain “a section or line that outlines that trust funds must not be used to purchase alcohol”.

A probe into Griffin Schools Trust also concluded that chains should ensure “procurement is open, fair and transparent, value for money and... that they have documentary

evidence of the decisions that have been made”.

Glynn added that the academy trust handbook and local authority-maintained school guidance should “capture the learnings... so ...it makes it easier to hold people to account”.

**Two-month promise**

Acland-Hood said officials would now consult trust and college “forums” to “seek feedback” on how they “further support” the sector “to understand the gaps in practice identified and lessons they can learn from the investigations”.

She also reiterated the ESFA’s commitment to publishing the “outcome reports within two months ... to provide transparency over how public money is spent”.

However, the last of the five reviews released this week was completed last summer.

Meanwhile, investigations into alleged scandals, including the Bright Tribe Trust and SchoolsCompany, remain gathering dust.

Of the reports published this week, it was found £570,000 of payments to a company linked to an unnamed staff member at Griffin Schools Trust from 2014 to 2021 had broken rules. Almost £2,500 of “contentious” payments on “antique furniture” and artwork were identified.

At Stephenson (MK) Trust, £25,700 of “irregular” spend on gift cards for staff attendance between 2016 and 2022 was uncovered.

Tennyson Learning Community Trust was found to have an “improper recruitment process” and that £900 of cash generated from selling “obsolete” iPhones to staff in 2019 had been misplaced for three years.

[READ MORE OF THE REPORT FINDINGS HERE](#)


## NEWS: CURRICULUM

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# Most teachers shun Oak and use their own lesson plans

RHI STORER

@RHISTORERWRITES

Just one in ten teachers use the Oak national academy to plan lessons, raising questions about the quango's value amid a wider spending review.

The DfE's September school and college voice survey found that in the past academic year nearly nine in ten secondary teachers still developed their own lesson plans, with many also using resources produced by their trusts.

Thirteen per cent of secondary teachers and 11 per cent of primary and special school teachers used Oak resources. A total of 2,683 were surveyed.

Of those that used Oak's resources, 41 per cent also said they used it less frequently, with just around a quarter saying materials were used more frequently.

Meanwhile, nearly half of those surveyed "did not know" about the quality of the resources.

Just under one in five said they were "high quality", with a quarter saying they were "neither high nor low quality".



Oak, an online classroom and resource hub, was launched during the pandemic to support schools with remote learning.

It rebranded in 2022, focusing on providing high-quality curriculum resources to stop teachers having to "reinvent the wheel".

However, 88 per cent of secondary teachers and 74 per cent of primary teachers said they still used their own lesson plans.

Three-quarters of secondary staff used curriculum resources developed by their school or trust, compared with 67 per cent of primary staff.

However, an Oak spokesperson said the survey was conducted last year, before new curriculum resources were available.

"Up-to-date data shows that usage is rising by 200 per cent year on year and more than one in three teachers now use Oak content," they added.

Independent evaluations also showed resources were helping to reduce workload.

The British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA), the Publishers Association and the Society of Authors launched a judicial review against Oak's creation, saying Oak was an "existential risk" to their sector and the conversion of Oak amounted to an "unlawful state subsidy".

The review has been paused until September.

Labour is now reportedly considering abolishing hundreds of quangos as part of a Whitehall savings drive.

When asked by Schools Week in March whether the DfE was considering Oak in the review, Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, said: "We have no plans to make any changes there."



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# Public targets could 'halve persistent absence'

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

The government should "mobilise a national effort" and revive "public targets" to halve persistent absence, according to Moira Wallace, the guru who spearheaded New Labour's huge school attendance boost.

Wallace led the Social Exclusion Unit, set up by Tony Blair in 1997 in the Cabinet Office to drive down high absence rates with a "joined-up solutions to joined-up problems".

Hundreds of millions were invested in programmes and reduction targets were set, halving severe absence in secondary schools and cutting persistent absence by 45 per cent.

In a new paper for the Institute for Government, Wallace has now set out a blueprint for how the new Labour government could solve a new absence crisis. Here are the main recommendations.

## 1. Bring back attendance targets...

The decision to set public targets "was a key ingredient in the success of absence policy in the 2000s, providing the spur to match resource and attention to the scale of the problem", Wallace said.

The coalition government ditched them and absence rates started rising again in 2013.

Rates then soared during the Covid pandemic and have remained stubbornly high since.

Wallace said a "sensible aspiration would be to match past success in reducing the most serious forms of absence" – which meant targeting a 45 per cent reduction in persistent absence rates and halving severe absence over seven years.

## 2. ...but don't expect schools to do all the work

However, expecting schools to tackle absence alone "will not work".

Instead, government should "mobilise a national effort to tackle absence and children missing school".

This should include support from the Treasury to give schools and local authorities the resources they needed.

A comprehensive long-term strategy should be led by a national delivery board chaired by a DfE minister.

## 3. Get health involved

Illness remains the single biggest cause of school absence.

The DfE and the Department of Health and Social



Care "need to ask what can be done to reduce the amount of illness experienced by children, ensure children get access to treatment as fast as possible, and support those who are ill to keep learning when they cannot be at school", Wallace added.

## 4. Recognise other factors

Last time it was in government, Labour had success because of a "broad-based strategy that tackled the multiple drivers of absence.

"But over the last decade absence policy has skirted the big issues of adolescent health, problems in the special needs system, school disengagement, family stress, and the fear of bullying and crime," Wallace said in her report.

To reduce absence successfully government "will need to go further in recognising and communicating all the factors that drive the current absence problem".

## 5. Support, don't blame parents

The state "rightly expects parents to support their child's attendance at school".

But that "should not slip into assuming that it is inevitably parents' fault if their children don't attend".

## 6. Re-establish partnerships

Local partnership working on children's issues had been "under severe strain" from funding pressures, and academisation and geographically scattered multi-academy trusts.

The government needed to "re-establish robust and empowered local partnerships, and work closely with them towards a shared purpose".

The DfE should develop local partnerships,

inviting local authorities to the table alongside schools and trusts to establish regular conversations about absence.

## 7. Learn from New Labour programmes

Wallace said two key spending programmes "kick-started improvement" under the Blair government.

Excellence in Cities aimed to improve educational achievement in disadvantaged areas, providing learning mentors and funding in-school learning support units.

The Behaviour Improvement Programme, which also began in 2002, embedded action on absence alongside behaviour and school exclusion. By 2005, it had spent £331 million.

The report found these schemes served as "catalysts for successful innovation on absence, behaviour and attainment".

They combined central investment and local partnership with "freedom to tailor action to local circumstances".

"Nearly 25 years on, it would be a smart move for DfE to create a modern equivalent to these."

## 8. 'Watch the data like a hawk'

Close monitoring of progress and evaluation of policies were "key to the last Labour government's school absence programme. They should come to the fore again now.

"With virtually real-time data on weekly absence, as well as plentiful information on key drivers such as children's perceptions of school, and experience of bullying, the government has an enormous advantage over its predecessors and should make the most of it."



## NEWS: MISCONDUCT

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## Non-white teachers 'over-represented' at TRA hearings, say unions

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Education unions have launched legal action against the Teaching Regulation Agency over concerns non-white teachers are "over-represented" in misconduct referrals.

The leadership unions NAHT and ASCL, the National Education Union, teaching union NASUWT and Community have lodged a claim for judicial review of what they call "significant non-compliance" with equalities duties.

They said the TRA's decision not to collect data on protected characteristics such as age, disability, race and sexual orientation of the teachers referred to it made it "impossible to evaluate" how its policies and practices impacted different groups.

They also want the TRA to publish data on the protected characteristics of members of the public who make referrals.

In a statement, the unions said they were particularly "concerned that black and minority ethnic teachers may be over-represented in referrals to the TRA.

"There is a concern about the underlying reasons for such referrals and whether they stem from discriminatory stereotypes, such as inaccurately labelling the teachers' behaviour as overly aggressive."

There was "also a concern that, in comparison with heterosexual teachers, the TRA has investigated some LGBTQ+ teachers for alleged sexual misconduct, where there are no grounds for doing so at the referral stage.

"The unions are also concerned that the TRA is electing to investigate teachers even when the allegations made against them lack merit and are unsupported by evidence, only to drop such cases before the hearing stage."

**Prolonged investigations 'take a heavy toll'**

Unions have repeatedly criticised the agency for how it handles teacher misconduct cases, particularly the time it takes to conclude them.

Schools Week revealed last year how two teachers had been waiting more than eight years for their misconduct cases to conclude, with the "shattering impact" of lengthy waits having "potentially devastating implications".

Prolonged investigations "take a heavy toll on



teachers, affecting their health, wellbeing, and careers", the unions said.

"If LGBTQ+ and black and minority ethnic teachers are over-represented in the TRA's processes, they will be particularly affected by this."

They said they had sent a letter before action to Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary – who is legally responsible for the TRA – on April 3.

However, they "did not receive a substantive response within the deadline, so on April 17 the unions submitted a claim for judicial review at the High Court".

In their letter before action, the unions said they were told in May last year that the TRA was "going to review and reconsider its policy on collecting data about the protected characteristics of its service users".

In January this year, it told unions that it would be "disproportionate to gather and retain equalities data", and "as such, the TRA will continue with its current position not to collect this data".

Guidance from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission states public bodies must publish data "about the protected characteristics of your employees and others affected by your work, such as those who use your services".

The unions argued that the General Medical Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council and Solicitors' Regulatory Authority, which "exercise very similar functions" to the TRA, "proactively collect and evaluate 'hard statistical data' in relation to the exercise of their functions".

**Trojan Horse concerns linger**

Their concern "is reinforced by how the TRA's predecessor, the NCTL, treated the so-called 'Trojan Horse' teachers". The Trojan Horse affair was an alleged plot by Muslim hardliners to take over state schools in Birmingham.

The NCTL misconduct cases against five teachers caught up in the affair were dropped in 2017 after an "abuse of justice".

During the hearing "repeated concerns about race and religious discrimination were raised", the unions said. "This included concerns about the propriety of NCTL adopting and relying on witness evidence tainted by race and/or religious discrimination."

The unions want the government to confirm it will collect data on the protected characteristics of those who sit on professional conduct panels, presenting officers and legal advisers, all persons referred to the TRA and members of the public making referrals.

The TRA said it "investigates all alleged instances of serious misconduct by teachers as set out in legislation and our published guidance, irrespective of particular characteristics such as age, disability, race and sexual orientation.

"TRA is mindful of the impact allegations of serious misconduct can have on teachers and has taken steps to reduce the duration of its investigations, including significantly increasing the number of professional conduct panel hearings it holds year-on-year."

## INTERVIEW: UNIONS

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## Union to push for letting academies rejoin councils

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

A headteachers' union is set to campaign for academies to be allowed to return to local authority oversight, warning schools are waiting "years" to be moved to new trusts.

A motion to the annual conference of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) this weekend will call for a change to the law that prevents academies from becoming community schools again.

It comes after the National Education Union passed a motion calling for the same change.

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, said last year it was something she was "open to considering", but the proposal was not included in the government's schools bill.

Paul Whiteman, the union's general secretary, told Schools Week the "concept of schools having the power of movement when they're not being served properly is a strong concept".

The motion warns that every year, schools across the country "find themselves in the position that 'nobody wants them'".

They were often in areas of significant disadvantage and were deemed as needing to be re-brokered to another MAT, which could take years.

"Other schools, for a variety of reasons, find that having joined a MAT, it did not meet their needs or expectations and they regret going through with the process.

"Where school leaders are faced with these challenges, they should be able to approach their LA and discuss whether they could return to them."

If passed, the union's leadership will be instructed to lobby government to change the law.

Whiteman said a school should have "some choice" and say, "actually, your ethos as an academy chain doesn't fit with our ethos, or actually, we don't think you're supporting us in the way that you should do.

"And therefore, the market inverts. The schools have the power in this market, rather than the big academy central offices having the power to lord it over the schools, for want of a better term."

The practicalities of a return to council oversight – with capacity cut back as more schools convert – would be "part of the debate".



Paul Whiteman

## 'The schools have the power in this market'

There could also be problems over who would make any decision on behalf of a school, particularly as governors and staff are appointed by the trust it belongs to.

But Labour has faced criticism over its schools bill policies, such as taking away academy freedoms and ending the legal duty to academies failing schools.

Its curriculum and assessment review is also considering whether to scrap the English Baccalaureate.

Whiteman called on the government not to "flinch in the face of those criticisms that you've gone soft on standards. Ignore them.

"You're not going soft on standards. You're just measuring standards in a different way. You have a majority that's big enough to deal with that.

"You can see the [government's] ambition for standards is very real, and will put our members to task. Our members aren't scared of that. There's no one more ambitious for higher rising standards than school leaders and teachers."

But heads also wanted mechanisms that measured them fairly, that were proportionate and not dangerous to their health and safety.

Delegates will also debate a motion on Ofsted's reforms, calling on the union leadership to "fully explore the legal and industrial options available

... to protect the mental and physical health and wellbeing of school leaders and staff".

The watchdog recently consulted on plans to judge schools with five grades across up to 11 judgment areas. Reforms followed a coroner's ruling in 2023 that an inspection contributed to the suicide of headteacher Ruth Perry.

Whiteman said there was "relief in the system" when the government scrapped single-phrase headline judgments.

But the fear had been replaced by the proposals so far. "The fear of our members is [inspections] get worse under the new proposals because there's so much more to be inspected. It's less clear where the lines of division are.

"If it goes through, my very real fear is we will suffer, if not the tragedy of a suicide, the tragedy of losing more and more school leaders and teachers."

He said the union would await the outcome of the consultation and whether the reforms were changed, but "we might hit the measure of a trade dispute over their failure to change in the face of evidence".

Delegates will also debate a motion on the school funding crisis, warning of the "detrimental effects on the health and well-being of school leaders and staff".

## NEWS

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# Wrack vows to stay put as NASUWT general secretary

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Matt Wrack has vowed to stay as NASUWT general secretary after the union was forced to reopen nominations and pay legal costs of £78,000 following a High Court challenge of its election process.

The teaching union announced last week that Wrack had been elected to succeed Dr Patrick Roach, signalling that no one had the 25 branch nominations needed to challenge him as its executive's nominee.

But it has now said Wrack, the former leader of the Fire Brigades Union, will serve as acting leader while nominations are reopened, following a legal challenge by Neil Butler and Luke Lockyer.

Butler had been blocked from standing because he was not a union member. Wrack also did not have membership – and had never been a teacher.

The NASUWT said its executive had “received further legal advice” and “consider that as a union it is important that there be stability and



Matt Wrack

that the general secretary be appointed free from any suggestion that they have been elected otherwise than in accordance with due process”.

According to *The Guardian*, the union had been warned it was likely to lose in court. It also had to pay legal costs.

Wrack's nomination by the traditionally moderate union was unexpected and controversial.

The veteran left-winger is a close ally of Daniel Kebede, the general secretary of the National Education Union, and his selection raised speculation of a future merger, something members roundly rejected earlier this month.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Wrack said he did not plan to stand aside. He accused political enemies of a “ludicrous” attempt to block his appointment, citing attacks from former

education secretary Michael Gove and others.

“It's about trying to do a hatchet job on me because they don't want effective trade unionism,” he said.

The national executive has now reopened nominations, to close on May 26. Local associations will be allowed to submit nominations on behalf of “members or non-members”.

If any other candidate gets the required 25 nominations, a ballot will begin on June 19 and close on July 23.

Butler, the union's national officer for Wales, said he was “pleased that our union has finally listened to the concerns raised by myself and many members.

“Above all, the rights of NASUWT members to choose their leader freely and democratically must be upheld.”

He added it was a “shame that this matter was not resolved before legal proceedings were issued.

“So much time, and valuable union funds, have been wasted because of a failure to follow what was clearly stated in the union's rules.”

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

## Specialists needed to stop violence against women and girls

Every secondary school and alternative provision should have a lead staff member dedicated to preventing violence against women and girls, a youth charity has said.

After a poll found one in eight teachers has reported sexual assaults between pupils, the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) said schools needed “specialists to stop the harm”.

A survey by Teacher Tapp for the charity found that 13 per cent reported a child sexually assaulting another in the past term.

But 45 per cent of secondary teachers said they lacked confidence in teaching how to intervene if pupils saw a sexual assault.

Fifty-five per cent of secondary teachers also cited a lack of confidence or expertise as the main barrier to delivering PSHE and relationships, sex and health education. Thirty-one per cent never had training to teach the subjects.

And 70 per cent said they were not confident in identifying and delivering evidence-based



interventions to prevent violence, while 27 per cent said they did not feel confident teaching pupils how to have healthy relationships.

The Labour government has pledged to halve violence against women and girls within a decade. The YEF said this required “clear, targeted action”.

The government should invest £1 million to pilot a violence against women and girls (VAWG) lead training grant across 50 schools, colleges and alternative provision settings.

Modelled on existing grants for school mental health leads, this initiative “would fund the appointment and training of VAWG leads to develop school-wide strategies, improve RSHE

lessons, bring in specialist external providers and train other staff members”.

Up to £35 million should then scale up the initiative if it showed success.

And £100 million should be spent over five years to deliver evidence-based violence reduction programmes for children most at risk.

This “could involve extending the Department for Education's SAFE taskforces or providing targeted funding” to schools in areas with the highest levels of violence.

Pupil premium spending guidance should be updated to “explicitly encourage schools to invest in evidence-based violence reduction strategies”.

Jon Yates, the chief executive of the YEF and a former DfE adviser, said: “It's time to act. Research shows that lessons on healthy relationships can make a real difference.

“The Labour government has the opportunity to make a bold statement that violence against women and girls will not be tolerated.”





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## Investigation

CHAMINDA JAYANETTI | @CJAYANETTI



# THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD FOR SEND PUPILS

**Travel costs for vulnerable youngsters are again in the sights of local authorities desperate to cut costs – meaning journey times of over an hour and independent travel for many**

**M**ore than one in three councils are taking new measures to slash spending on home-to-school transport for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), sparking fears more vulnerable pupils will be left with hour-long school drop-offs.

One council even admitted cutting travel support will be “significantly disadvantageous” for the hundreds of affected children and families, but was “necessary” given the financial challenges.

And transport is just one area being cut. A Schools Week investigation into councils’ 2025-26 budgets also found an early intervention social worker programme for schools being axed. An enrichment scheme guaranteeing disadvantaged youngsters a chance to go to the theatre and own musical instruments is also being scaled back.

Meanwhile, 10 councils are planning to increase the cost of traded services to schools to boost income.

Baroness Anne Longfield, executive chair of the

Centre for Young Lives think tank, said declines in funding for wider services, especially on early intervention, means schools are “increasingly being left to pick up the pieces and the most vulnerable children are forced to bear the brunt”.

“It should be a core function of local government to fund transport to the most suitable school for a child,” she added. “We can’t expect every child can go to their closest school whatever their circumstances and whatever the consequences.”

# Investigation: Funding

## Changes 'significantly disadvantageous'

Schools Week found 60 councils with education responsibilities aim to reduce SEND transport costs by at least £100,000 this year.

In total, councils expect to spend £1.5 billion on SEND transport for pre-16 year olds in the 2024-25 financial year – which is triple the bill incurred in 2016. It is part of the broader crisis in the SEND system that has seen surging needs, rising costs, councils in crisis and widespread unmet need.

Common measures being adopted by local authorities include increased use of independent travel training, replacing directly provided transport with personal travel budgets for SEND children's families, changes in routes and reduced use of single-passenger taxis.

Some councils are also factoring in reduced transport costs stemming from plans to increase the number of SEND children educated within the local area, thereby cutting the number of expensive journeys to schools outside a locality.

In some areas, the measures are intended to temper the growth of SEND transport costs rather than cut spending outright, with home to school transport frequently being both a cost pressure and savings measure in local authorities' budgets.

Leicester City Council has among the severest proposals, affecting 350-450 children and young adults with SEND. Its plans mean such pupils would "not be provided with any transport assistance, save in certain limited cases and where exceptional circumstances apply," a council report said.

Any transport assistance that is provided would only be in the form of a personal transport budget.

The council report recognises the changes are "likely to be significantly disadvantageous for affected young people and young adults (and their families)", but are "necessary... in the circumstances facing the council".



## 'The most vulnerable children are forced to bear the brunt'

A spokesperson for Leicester City Council told Schools Week the proposal had been through consultation and the authority expected to publish a decision shortly.

### 'Councils ignoring equality duties'

But Eleanor Wright, legal officer at charity SOS!SEN, said: "Too many [councils] are ignoring Department for Education guidance reminding them of their equality duties to young people with SEN and disabilities, who should not be disadvantaged when it comes to accessing further education in comparison with non-disabled peers."

She expressed particular concern over measures focused on young people aged over 16, where councils' legal obligations are weaker than for those of compulsory school age.

Schools Week has identified 16 councils with savings plans related to post-16 SEND transport, such as Hampshire County Council, which is looking to save £300,000

in 2025-26 and £2m in 2026-27.

The council will cease post-16 transport for families not on low incomes. Those on low incomes will be expected to make financial contributions and act as "passenger assistants".

Councils are not legally obliged to provide free SEND transport to over-16s, but Wright warned that councils will be breaking the law if transport cuts mean young people cannot get to the school or college named in their EHCP.

"We are hearing anecdotally of disabled young people who have had to leave education because they cannot travel to their school or college, which is wholly unacceptable," she said.

Meanwhile, Simon Knight, joint head of Frank Wise community special school in Oxfordshire, said: "Too often, reviews of access to transport focus on exploiting weaknesses in the statutory

requirements in order to minimise cost, irrespective of whether the outcome is reasonable for children and families.

"The system is broadly incoherent and this incoherence can impact significantly on children and their families.



Baroness Anne Longfield



Simon Knight



# Investigation: Funding

"Too often, access to transport is just another battle for families to fight, as local authorities try to reduce expenditure that is rising due to the wider dysfunction of the SEND system. Once again, as local authorities try to reduce their costs, it is children and families who pay the price."

## Multiple pick-ups and route 'optimisation'

Barnet Council in north London is among those looking to increase the take-up of personal transport budgets, where parents have to arrange transport themselves, as well as using multi-pickup points rather than individual taxis.

Ten councils are seeking to increase independent travel training for SEND pupils, while others are proposing "optimisation" of travel routes.

But Wright said travel budgets "often fall far short of the actual costs involved", while optimising routes can drag out journey times, causing potential difficulties for children with medical conditions such as musculoskeletal problems, travel sickness and seizures.

She said: "Routes tend to be changed so that one taxi or bus can take more pupils, which can take journey times well over 75 minutes as the vehicle travels to various pick-up points and may take time loading in a number of disabled children."

Other councils are making individual cuts to education programmes.

Merton, in south London, is ceasing to fund its Social Workers in School project, which carries out child protection work and engages with schools to reduce the flow of cases coming into statutory services.

The council's budget documents admit the funding cut will mean additional statutory child protection work having to be absorbed by current social work teams that are "already under pressure".

## Theatre trips and music grants axed

Newham in east London is cutting 25 per cent of funding for its Enrichment Programme, which



## 'We are hearing of disabled children who have had to leave education'

funds cultural and creative activities for 25,000 children and young people, particularly around music.

This includes axing its secondary school theatre scheme, meaning teenagers will no longer be guaranteed a professional theatre experience.

In addition, schools will no longer be able to bid for arts and culture projects, the maximum value of school music grants will be lowered, and the fund to purchase musical instruments for children will be scrapped.

The council says it will develop "a revised approach to enrichment, heritage and cultural strategy programmes".

Dorset is halving funding for its Education Board, which works to close the school attainment gap and commissions projects to improve outcomes.

Meanwhile, 10 councils are seeking to drive higher income from traded services to schools, while three – Manchester, Oldham and Staffordshire – are registering parental fines for unauthorised school absences as income growth to help

balance the books.

Mohon Ali, Oldham's cabinet member for education, said a new national framework introduced in September had "led to an increase in requests for the council to issue fines for leave/holidays in term time".

"The [national] fine rate has been increased from £160 to £180 and we are now able to issue two fines to the same parent for the same child within the same academic year," he added. In its response to the National Audit Office's report into the SEND crisis, the Department for Education said the "rising cost of school transport underscores the need for more children to attend a local mainstream school that meets their needs".

A new data collection was launched in February to help councils benchmark their provision, "enabling them to learn from one another, find efficiencies and support decision making".

New guidance for "partnership working" on school transport will also "be published soon".



Mohon Ali

Curriculum  
ConversationDO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US [NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK)MICHELE  
GREGSONGeneral secretary and CEO,  
National Society for Education in  
Art and Design (NSEAD)How to avoid a managed  
decline of art and design

**The review's evidence that art and design are thriving masks some very concerning statistics and some very real weaknesses in our national offer, explains Michele Gregson**

**W**hen the curriculum and assessment review was announced, Professor Becky Francis singled out art and design's supposed decline as an example of an educational myth. However, it would be complacent to say that the subject is thriving.

On the face of it, GCSE entry data for the subject is relatively stable. As the review's interim report points out, it remains among the most popular subjects for take-up at GCSE.

Art and design is certainly popular, but the reality is that children are getting less of it across the board, and the quality and relevance of provision are in serious decline.

Indeed, the focus on GCSE data as the litmus test for the subject's health and resilience is a major flaw in the review's analysis. The 'stable' take-up figures conceal a more worrying trend. Since 2019, entries for GCSE design and technology (D&T) have fallen to catastrophic levels.

At the same time, we have seen a migration to art and design specialisms in those areas that were previously served by this

GCSE. A shift towards art graphics, 3D design and textiles, has been coupled with a shift away from fine art and the broader art, craft and design GCSE.

This shift is not reflected in what we are seeing in many art and design classrooms, where the curriculum has gone flat. Research reveals a huge reduction in exposure to three-dimensional materials, techniques, processes and ways of thinking.

Art and design isn't thriving; some of it has just moved to D&T workshops – masking the very real decline in both subjects.

**The equity gap**

Some of the challenges for art and design appear to be well understood. In particular, the curriculum does not represent and include all learners or speak to their interests and aspirations.

With a curriculum that lacks ambition (where the so-called 'great artists' take centre stage), the best schools have got better while everyone else has got lost. This is the equity gap through which too many children are falling.

The impact of reduced time, resources and teacher confidence also mean that too many children do not see themselves in the curriculum – not in the work that they are doing or the artists that they are learning about.



“ The current curriculum looks to the past

**The reality gap**

Meanwhile, too many schools are increasingly focused on learning about materials and techniques and have moved away from creativity and real-world practice.

Students need to develop digital, AI and green design skills, but the current national curriculum looks to the past and does not help teachers prepare them to navigate the world they are growing up in.

**The skills gap**

There are other gaps to address. A key priority for the review must be to define how knowledge differs from other subjects.

Art, craft and design are rich in knowledge, and not all of it is predetermined. Mastery learning in art and design is not the same as in other academic subjects. It is not about achieving a fixed point and moving on; it is a continuous process of practice, reflection and engagement. This is the key to a genuinely inclusive curriculum.

**The policy gap**

The panel have committed to working with the sector during this

next phase to better understand the nuanced position of each subject. This must translate into an opportunity to address the weaknesses of a poorly defined, backwards-facing curriculum and create something that has meaning and relevance for all learners.

However, policy must go deeper as a result of the health check offered by this review, because not all problems can be solved through curriculum alone.

Learning in arts and design operates within a careful balance between adequate time, resources and specialist teaching and good curriculum design. This patchwork includes extra-curricular provision, which provides essential routes for learners to engage at a deeper level and pursue their passions.

Some of these aspects may be out of the review's scope, but they are inextricably linked.

So the curriculum review has the potential to be a useful first step, but ministers will need to have capacity, time, and the stomach for a genuine whole-system review if we are to see art, craft and design genuinely thrive.

## Opinion

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## JACK WORTH

School workforce lead, National  
Foundation for Educational  
Research

## Recruitment crisis: Are we finally turning the corner?

**This week's figures reveal positive signs for the teacher workforce, but there's a long way to go to meet Labour's 6,500 teacher pledge, explains Jack Worth**

Good news has been rare in the world of teacher recruitment and retention, but this week saw encouraging signs of improvement.

Data published by the DfE shows accepted applications to secondary initial teacher training (ITT) are up 12 per cent on last year, including increases of almost half for two perennial shortage subjects: computing and physics.

Meanwhile, the targets for how many trainees will be needed to meet schools' future needs are around 20 per cent lower, again with shortage subjects such as maths (down by 25 per cent), computing (down by 33 per cent) and physics (down by 37 per cent) leading the way.

As a result, the overall picture has changed rapidly. In December, primary and 12 out of 17 secondary subjects missed their targets, with secondary recruitment overall nearly 40 per cent below target.

Just four months later, our forecast for this year suggests primary, maths, English and science could all meet their targets, with secondary recruitment getting to 86 per cent

of target.

As expected, falling primary pupil numbers and a slowdown in secondary pupil number growth have fed into a reducing need for new teachers.

Interest in teacher training is also up, probably due to the wider labour market cooling and last summer's above-inflation teacher pay rise.

A range of other small improvements in supply, such as more trainees entering ITT last year, fewer teachers leaving and more ex-teachers returning have also added up to a big change in estimated need.

However, while the signs are more positive for a key metric of system health and pupil number trends will go on easing some pressure, schools are not out of the woods.

Overall secondary recruitment at 86 per cent of target is similar to the pre-pandemic years when the teacher supply challenge was growing and the DfE developed its recruitment and retention strategy.

It certainly seems a lot less worrying than the 48 per cent of target from 2022/23, but it still represents a continued squeeze on the number of teachers available.

Key subjects also remain below target. For example, forecasted physics recruitment at 71 per cent of target rather than the 16 per cent it was in 2023 still represents stiff competition.



## “Volatility can go both ways

Our forecast indicates that supply may be closer to meeting schools' needs in 2026, but this year's job market is based on last year's recruitment, which was well below target in many subjects. Schools' tight budget positions mean leaders may be more hesitant to hire for next year anyway, but underlying staff capacity strains remain.

Further, a single year of meeting targets is not enough to reverse cumulative damage from many years of under-recruitment. Maths teaching by non-specialists rose from 12 per cent in 2021 to 15 per cent in 2023. It would take sustained recruitment at or above the target to reverse this trend.

Finally, volatility can go both ways. A positive sign does not mean an inevitable trend.

So Labour can't ditch its pledge to 'recruit 6,500 teachers' by the end of the parliament.

DfE's targets are based only on maintaining the status quo, but accumulated shortages still need filling. Even meeting the new estimated targets would lead to only 1,500 more secondary teachers by

2026/27.

In addition, further education (FE) and special schools are part of the pledge, and each face rapidly growing demand and significant shortages. Their recruitment metrics differ, so they often go unnoticed, but addressing the staffing challenges in these crucial sectors should take on greater prominence.

Finally, delivering this pledge is crucial to Labour's 'opportunity mission'. It could take considerable pressure off schools and enable sustained improvement that benefits schools serving disadvantaged communities the most.

According to the National Audit Office, DfE's own assessment is that meeting the pledge is a 'significant challenge'. Further investment in improving the financial attractiveness of teaching, sustained effort to reduce workload and more opportunities for teachers to work flexibly could help.

In sum, there are finally some green shoots of recovery, but we need to keep up the momentum.



# Opinion

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## ALISON PEACOCK

CEO, Chartered  
College of Teaching

### Why our members are not reassured after meeting Sir Martyn

**The chief inspector's visit to the Chartered College didn't alleviate our members' concerns, explains Alison Peacock, but it did point the way to some potential solutions**

When fellows of the Chartered College of Teaching met to discuss Ofsted's proposals with His Majesty's chief inspector last week, their questions went to the heart of the problem: inspection is currently a process that is 'done to' schools, their leaders and staff.

It is certainly true that we need to know that schools are fulfilling their statutory responsibilities and providing the best education possible for the pupils in their care.

It is also important that school leaders have opportunities to see their provision from other perspectives, to see how other schools manage similar challenges and to justify their approaches.

However, this isn't a role Ofsted has fulfilled in the past, and we're concerned that the new framework is still a long way from this.

Sir Martyn Oliver is clear that he wants inspection to be a professional conversation. He told members that he wants inspectors to start with conversations with leaders, staff, parents and pupils to understand how they see the school.

He wants those conversations

to shape the direction of the inspection: "Tell me what your improvement priorities are, what you're really proud of".

He also wants inspectors to be able to tell school leaders if they see something that concerns them, and ask for evidence that it's being addressed.

And he wants to invite leaders to explain how their context and intake impacts on their outcomes, and what steps they are taking to meet the needs of their pupils.

His vision, as he told members, is a system where leaders can be honest about their strengths and weaknesses, where they can be challenged when their practice isn't as good as they think, and shared as exemplary when it is.

I think we'd all love to see that.

The problem is that teachers and leaders have lost trust in the inspectorate. They feel that they have to second-guess what inspectors are looking for, which leads to hours of unnecessary work 'just in case' and huge pressure to demonstrate perfect provision.

A new framework, particularly one that is open to different interpretations, won't solve the problem, described by one Fellow, of Ofsted's subjectivity.

Rightly, our members want greater clarity and fewer focus areas. And given that inspection can never be a truly objective process, they



### “ A new framework won't solve Ofsted's subjectivity problem

need to know that they can hold the inspectorate accountable for being, in the chief inspector's own words, "accurate, fair and consistent".

Rebuilding trust in Ofsted depends on it, so we would like to see a clear process for monitoring inspection decisions, to identify inconsistencies and bias, with open reporting of the issues and how they are being resolved.

More fundamentally still, the Ofsted model has led to the profession losing trust in itself. Too many schools are focused on 'what Ofsted wants', leading to a loss of creativity and innovation. Leaders feel the pressure to make improvements quickly rather than focus on deep changes.

We've seen this clearly in our Rethinking Curriculum project, with leaders unwilling to make changes they knew were right for their children for fear of Ofsted judgment.

Members want inspection to recognise the cyclical nature of improvement, and the time it takes to effect real change. I am particularly concerned that the proposed 'exemplary' judgment could again be seen as the

inspectorate determining what excellence looks like, with leaders feeling pressure to copy 'Ofsted-approved' practice.

Instead, members want a framework that encourages schools to collaborate and share their own case studies of excellence and opportunities to learn from their improvement journey.

For the profession to regain its voice and to attract and retain excellent teachers, we need an inspection system that empowers. And for that we need an inspectorate that is knowledgeable, reflective and open to learning.

Sir Martyn was clear about the importance of training. He reiterated that he is keen to work with us to carry the learning from chartered status into accredited inspector training.

I believe that our focus on professional principles, critical reading of evidence and understanding its uses and impacts in practice would be an ideal basis for long-term development of inspectors' professional practice.

But just like school improvement, rebuilding trust will take time.

## Opinion

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CHRISTOPHER  
TRIBBLE

Headteacher,  
Honiton Primary School

## Labour's funding decision on pay pits frontline against bottom line

**This week's announcement that pay awards won't be fully funded will result in vital and too often under-valued roles being lost. Again.**

I watched as his finger traced the line from left to right across the screen, in its steely Excel glow, wincing as it settled on the final column: "That's a luxury position. She could go."

These cold words were uttered by a chief finance officer we'd invited to review our standing.

The so-called 'luxury' was our pastoral manager: a trained counsellor, safeguarding lead and an emotional lifeline for dozens of families and vulnerable children, all rolled into one vital person.

With a single swipe, the complex needs of an entire school community were disregarded – replaced by the illusion of headline savings on a morbid spreadsheet.

With news this week that the government is unlikely to fund the difference between the 2.8 per cent pay rise it has budgeted for and the 4 per cent pay rise the school teachers' review body has reportedly recommended, this grim scenario will be played out across the country. Again.

For years now, those who stand on the frontline of education – teachers, support staff, and school leaders – have been pitted against those who manage the bottom line. More often

than not, the bottom line wins.

In grey rooms far removed from the classroom, faceless figures populate hungry databases and fuel insensitive algorithms. Budgets are squeezed, cuts are made and 'efficiencies' are celebrated.

Yet every number in those cells represents a potentially vital role: a teaching assistant calming an anxious child; a pastoral leader preventing a crisis; a lunchtime supervisor building relationships with vulnerable students. Every 'cost-saving' decision risks cutting away at the beating heart and bedrock of education.

Support staff are often the first to face the financial scalpel. They're seen as non-essential, an easy line to strike through when budgets are tight.

Teaching assistants, behaviour mentors, safeguarding officers, site managers, counsellors – all fall under the label of 'support', yet they are the foundations that keep schools standing strong. When they are lost, the impact ripples far wider and deeper than any budget forecast can predict.

A child struggling with speech and language delay, once supported by a specialist TA, falls behind permanently in the absence of early intervention.

A pupil at risk of exclusion finds no consistent adult to de-escalate a brewing situation.

An overstretched pastoral team



“ More often than not, the bottom line wins

finds itself unable to notice or act on safeguarding red flags before they become serious incidents.

A teacher without classroom support decides the workload is simply unmanageable, and burnout and exit from the profession ensue.

Short-term savings create long-term costs: financial, human and societal. What is saved on today's spreadsheet could cost millions later in alternative provision placements, mental health services, youth justice interventions, prisons or lost economic contribution.

Support staff are not 'luxuries' or 'add-ons'. They are specialist practitioners, nurturers, protectors, motivators and crucial links between students, families and teachers. Their work underpins every headline attainment statistic and every Ofsted judgement. Without them, the system is hollowed out from the inside.

Yet time and again, key stakeholders fail to see the real economy of investing in people. They demand better attendance, better outcomes, better behaviour while stripping

away the very support networks that make those achievements possible.

If decision-makers stood for one day in a busy school foyer, a social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) base, or a year one phonics lesson, they would see it clearly: success in education is not about cutting costs; it's about building capacity.

And failing to do that only costs more in the long term, because the tragic loss of expertise, trust and stability that results from staffing cuts takes years – and massive investment – to rebuild.

In the meantime, children suffer, families lose faith and schools, already stretched thin, buckle under the weight of impossible expectations.

If education is to thrive, we must stop viewing its people as expendable.

Protecting the frontline workforce is not a luxury; it is a necessity for building a strong, fair and sustainable education system.

Staffing is not a line-item. It is the future. And it deserves a better chance.

## Opinion

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LOIC  
MENZIES

Associate fellow, Institute for  
Public Policy Research

## Labour must usher in a new era of professional empowerment

**Labour's teacher training entitlement is key to delivering its opportunity mission. Here's what needs to happen to deliver on the government's promise, writes Loic Menzies**

**H**igh and rising standards for all" is a noble and ambitious vision, but a vision requires a strategy to become reality. That's where things get trickier, but a new report by IPPR and Ambition Institute maps out an important part of the journey.

If Bridget Phillipson's vision was 'decent standards for most', she could just pursue the same strategy that governments have opted for over the past couple of decades: clear expectations, tight oversight and firm intervention.

Moving to the next level will require going beyond that. To deliver her ambition, Phillipson's Department for Education will need to usher in the era of professional empowerment.

So what would a system that empowers look like?

In our report, Marie Hamer and I argue that strategic investment in teachers' professional expertise would unleash a powerful cycle of improvement, providing a welcome alternative to governments' historic fixation on carrots and sticks.

But for this to be possible, the professional development system needs to become a system. This will require a number of shifts.

### Sharing know-how

First, the teaching profession's knowledge and wisdom needs to be continually developed and refined. As Ben Glover from the think tank Demos argues, "knowledge is hard to come by and without it we cannot deliver effective public services".

The establishment of the Education Endowment Foundation means there has been huge progress in this area but there is further to go. Our system should capture, codify and share what Gert Biesta refers to as 'practical wisdom', encompassing teachers' contextual judgement, based on classroom experience and their professional values.

This type of knowledge capture needs to take place at scale, using sufficiently robust and critical approaches to avoid the risk of poor-quality evidence driving unjustified fads. These insights should contribute to the 'know-how' elements of the DfE's content frameworks.

### Layering provision

Second, we need a thriving ecosystem of high-quality providers who can disseminate this knowledge. Only then can universal access to professional learning be combined with space for choice, along with maximum impact.

Given the need to deliver at scale and the degree of quality assurance required, 'golden thread' programmes should continue to be offered by national organisations. However,



**“ We need an alternative to the fixation on carrots and sticks**

funding should also be directed towards smaller, local or specialist providers – including trusts, local authority-based networks and hubs, and subject associations.

By ensuring these providers can access funding streams (perhaps via the DfE's regional teams), the government can cultivate a strong pipeline of expert organisations for the future, while nurturing supportive local networks.

### Devolving control

Third, government must relinquish its inherent desire to control everything from the top. Instead, quality assurance and oversight should be robust but proportionate.

It's perfectly reasonable for national providers to go through an extensive procurement process along with ongoing monitoring, but onerous processes risk crushing smaller, regional providers.

Over time, the system should become increasingly self-managing. As quality rises and the sector's understanding of effective professional development grows, the need for oversight will recede.

A first step in handing over control would be to introduce open applications to expert advisory groups. Simultaneously, the DfE should work with sector bodies to agree a set of system priorities which its disparate funding streams could be directed towards.

### Strategic planning

Fourth, robust infrastructure cannot be built on shifting sands. The DfE needs to put professional development on a long-term footing.

One no-brainer would be to free up the substantial resources currently locked up in the growth and skills levy (previously known as the apprenticeship levy), to provide long-term funding for new short-course professional qualifications.

### Targeted support

Finally, a well-functioning system needs capacity, but at the moment scarce funding and time can prove insurmountable barriers to professional learning.

Tackling this requires action well beyond the professional development system. However, a step in the right direction would be for the DfE to allocate capacity grants to schools in the most challenging circumstances so that more teachers can access rich development opportunities.

Labour rightly put professional development at the heart of its 2024 education manifesto. To deliver its promised training entitlement, it must be embedded in a system that empowers the profession.

These proposals can take us there

**Read the full report,  
'A system that empowers' [here](#)**



## Solutions

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ANTONIA  
SPINKS

CEO, Pioneer  
Educational Trust

## How to get flexible working right

**Flexible working is key to creating inclusive workplaces and tackling our systemic recruitment and retention issues, writes Antonia Spinks. Here's how to get started**

**F**lexible working is much more than a concession for individuals; it is a strategic lever for building inclusive, resilient organisations. This is something we need for tackling recruitment and retention challenges.

As a flexible working ambassador for the Department for Education, and leader of a trust where it's key to our people strategy, I know getting flexible working right isn't just about having the right intentions.

Doing so requires two things: a clear, strategic vision that aligns with your school's culture and values, and robust, thoughtful implementation that makes it live and breathe every day.

Nobel prize-winning economist Claudia Goldin's work has shown that inflexible work structures are key drivers of the gender pay gap. But a lack of flexibility in schools is not just a gender issue; it presents a much broader challenge to diversity and inclusion.

If we are serious about equity, wellbeing and future-proofing our schools, flexible working must become part of how we think about people, culture and strategy – and not be an afterthought. Here's how:

### Understand where you are

Start with a discovery exercise: What flexible working already happens in your school or trust, formally or informally? What barriers – real or perceived – are staff facing? And how do current attitudes align with your mission and values?

This process frames flexible working as part of broader organisational health, not a standalone issue.

Get staff involved so you know your policies are making a difference in your setting. Ask them: what can we do in line with our values and culture? And what are we currently doing that doesn't align?

Then think about implications, for example on directed time and funding.

### Make flexibility a strategic priority

At Pioneer, we presume flexible working can work unless there's a genuine operational barrier. Staff don't need to justify their request. Whether it's related to a disability, caring, study, religious observance, hobbies or work/life balance, there is no hierarchy of reasons.

Embedding flexibility properly helps tackle systemic inequalities and ensures protected characteristics are in fact protected. Research from NFER, CIPD and Timewise all points to normalising flexibility as an important lever to close gaps in progression, improve retention and



“ There is no hierarchy of reasons for needing flexibility

strengthen staff wellbeing.

Flexible working isn't a perk for a few; it's a foundation for fairness.

### Culture, systems and strategy

A policy on paper is not enough. Flexible working must live in your school's leadership behaviours, communication and daily practices.

At Pioneer, we go beyond statutory flexible working rights. We have built a flexible job design process where staff can propose tailored arrangements annually. This helps ensure flexibility fits within operational needs while fostering innovation.

Systems matter to this process: clear cycles for staff conversations, transparent communications and fair decision-making all build the trust flexibility relies on.

### Address barriers head-on

Flexible working faces both structural and cultural barriers, from concerns about timetabling and cover to myths that flexible staff are less committed.

To overcome these barriers, school leaders need to be creative and strategic in their workforce planning and be explicit about reframing cultural assumptions. Equity doesn't mean identical treatment; it means fair opportunity.

On a practical level, it's also key to ensure staff have the IT equipment they need to make flexible arrangements work.

### Ambition and sustainability

Flexibility opens doors to smarter ways of working, not lower expectations. Schools that embrace it strategically – for instance through creative staffing models – find new ways to meet student needs and organisational goals.

At Pioneer, we rigorously monitor the impact of flexibility annually: surveying staff, tracking outcomes and adapting our approach.

Ultimately, sustainable flexible working boosts staff retention, supports wellbeing, strengthens diversity and drives improvement.

The real risk isn't offering too much flexibility; it's failing to offer enough.

Flexible working is a core lever for schools that are serious about being great places to work and delivering ambitious outcomes for all students.

As Claudia Goldin's work reminds us, the future belongs to organisations that design work around people's lives, not the other way around.

In schools, the question isn't whether we can afford flexibility. It's whether we can afford the opposite.

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# THE REVIEW

## BAD EDUCATION: WHY OUR UNIVERSITIES ARE BROKEN AND HOW WE CAN FIX THEM

**Author:** Matt Goodwin

**Publisher:** Bantam

**ISBN:** 1787635244

**Published:** 6 Feb 2025

**Reviewer:** Terry Freedman, Freelance edtech writer and publisher

"Thanks to your son, I managed to get a good grade at economics A-level, and then go on to gain a first in business studies at uni."

Mike (not his real name) was now working as a paramedic, where he'd found his metier. He was speaking to my mother as we waited in the queue in hospital to buy a cup of tea.

It was a great source of pride to me, getting hundreds of students through their A-levels and encouraging them to go to university. But for some time I have asked myself a question: would I recommend this route now?

For a start, as Tom Calver has pointed out in the *Sunday Times*, the difference between the average pay of graduates and non-graduates is declining. Factor in the debt incurred, combined with a depressingly high rate of interest, and the financial attraction of university palls somewhat.

One could argue that university nevertheless provides a wonderful opportunity to be exposed to alternative viewpoints, have access to the latest cutting edge research and enjoy the cut and thrust of debate.

However, these benefits are increasingly called into question by recent controversies surrounding universities.

For example, while I was reading this book, the University of Sussex was fined over half a million pounds for the way a gender-critical professor, Kathleen Stock, was effectively silenced. Meanwhile, over in the USA, Columbia University has had \$400 million of funding withdrawn because of antisemitism on campus.

One has the impression that the main role of a university these days is to maximise profit, while that of the majority of teaching staff is to ensure

the 'correct' views are passed on to students. All the while, students' main concern seems to be to seek protection from anything that might make them feel unsafe.

This is where Matt Goodwin's book comes in. Goodwin himself is often characterised as right-wing, reflecting his strong support for Brexit, controlled immigration and free speech advocacy. This book offers a detailed account of the state of the latter on British campuses today.

The book draws attention to the fact that because of universities' reliance on funding from sometimes dubious sources, they may sometimes behave in a hypocritical manner.

He also points out that while universities are rightly concerned with addressing diversity in terms of ethnicity and gender, the same cannot be said about diversity of opinion.

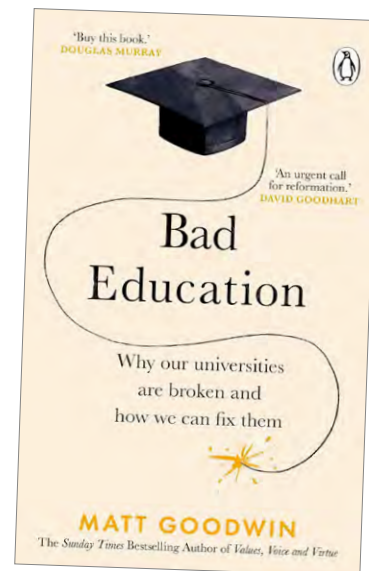
Indeed, expressing the 'wrong' opinion can get you ostracised and subjected to disciplinary procedures if you are a student, while lecturers face very real consequences to their careers for proposing to undertake the 'wrong' kind of research.

So what is to be done? Goodwin proposes government intervention, and therefore supports the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act passed by the last government and rues Labour's work to water it down, ostensibly to protect students from emotional harm.

Beyond that, Goodwin has nothing to say about how education policy more broadly or educators themselves might deal with the situation.

Perhaps the lesson for school leaders is to keep teaching young people to think and consume critically for themselves, and to

BOOK  
TV  
FILM  
RADIO  
EVENT  
RESOURCE



help them navigate the fine line between expressing robust opinion and offending others.

And perhaps the recent increase in policy attention on the 50 per cent who don't go to university by raising the status of vocational education is part of the solution too.

Goodwin doesn't say. The book is thoroughly researched and extends beyond mere polemic; however, its arguments often feel one-sided, and more about raising concerns than solving them.

Nevertheless, *Bad Education* is an important contribution to a very live debate. Sadly, without solutions schools can implement, this debate can only result in more and more people questioning whether today's universities continue to offer the transformative opportunities they did for a generation of Mikes.

The value of this book is that it requires us to examine such questions. Their implications for the school curriculum and accountability are potentially huge.

But while Goodwin benefits from writing this as an ex-insider, he is hindered by the very perspective that motivates him.



## THE CONVERSATION

### LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM

**Fiona Atherton**

Headteacher,  
Wrekin View  
Primary School

## WEATHERING SCHOOL



Usually, a bit of sunshine makes everything better, but with the education system in a seemingly constant state of turmoil, it's getting harder to stay positive about the future.

Children evidently feel the same. Whether due to shorter attention spans or easy access to the outside world, they are finding school life increasingly unappealing.

In this context, the latest *Education in Focus* podcast on school avoidance really resonated with me.

This issue isn't just a secondary school problem anymore. Increasingly, we are seeing school-related anxiety emerging in much younger children. And it's not about them being 'difficult' or parents being 'soft'. It's about real, often overwhelming distress that can be challenging to get to the root of.

Labelling pupils as 'school refusers' doesn't help. It risks isolating families at exactly the point when they need us to listen.

So we need to ask ourselves some really

difficult questions: What's triggering this anxiety? Is there anything about our school environment that might be creating additional barriers? How can we adapt, rather than expecting children to simply cope?

Early identification and flexible approaches are key, but so is creating a culture where wellbeing isn't just a policy but is visible in everything we do. Strong relationships, genuine listening and collaboration with families and pastoral teams must sit at the heart of our approach.

School avoidance isn't a behaviour to punish or a problem to 'fix'. It's a call for help, and if we heed it early, we can keep more pupils connected to their learning, their peers and their futures.

## SUNRISE CLUBS

Over on Facebook, a post by The Autistic SENCO about breakfast clubs made me pause and think this week.

We have a lovely, well-used breakfast club at my school, and it is a hugely important service for lots of children and families. But is what we're really doing "removing children from their homes earlier and earlier each day"? Are we in fact supporting a "system that forces both parents to work full-time, just to barely afford a home"?

The post makes a compelling case that "we need real solutions to support family life – not just band aids that make it easier for families to survive".

It made me reframe breakfast clubs as another example of schools picking up what are societal challenges. And it left me unsurprised when news emerged in these pages that schools have been dropping out of the government's pilot scheme for its breakfast club policy.



No matter how well-intentioned, we can't just keep adding this kind of pressure on school staff. If we do, we can't be surprised when we routinely have too few of them.

## GROW YOUR OWN

Speaking of which, I couldn't find a blog or podcast on this but it absolutely must be part of our professional conversation. Last week, the government rolled out new statutory guidance on early years nutrition.

Another well-intentioned policy, I can't help but feel that it's pushing yet more responsibilities onto schools that should primarily lie elsewhere.

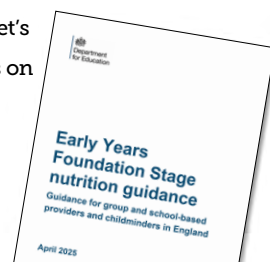
From September, schools will be expected to ensure children up to age five get meals, snacks and drinks that meet specific nutritional standards. The standards are sensible, but there's a glaring issue here: schools are being asked to pick up the slack for parents who are not managing their child's nutrition in the way the government expects.

We already know that many early years settings are under-resourced, understaffed and struggling to manage complex needs. Now they will also have to meet these complex needs around food too.

So why isn't the focus on real, systemic support for families and communities rather than another box to tick for schools?

Along with breakfasts and toothbrushing, schools are increasingly being asked to do the heavy lifting of child rearing. But expecting us to fill the gap left by a breakdown of the family institution isn't just unfair; it's unrealistic and arguably irresponsible.

How much more can we expect in the coming months? Let's hope the sun keeps on shining at least.



Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts



# The Knowledge

What we've learned about schools and their communities this week



## How can we better train and retain SENCOs?

**Bart Shaw, Operational lead for SEND school improvement, Whole Education**

Whole Education brings school and system leaders together to improve outcomes and experiences for all young people. Over the past five years we've worked with over 1,000 schools through our SEND School Improvement programme, seeing first-hand the ways in which SEND leaders are able to harness good practice to drive improvement.

Now, an independent evaluation of the programme by Professor Philip Garner is shedding light on some of the ways school leaders can develop their strategic leadership of SEND.

Over the 2023/2024 academic year, researchers carried out in-depth interviews with SEND leaders in local authorities (LAs), trusts and schools. They surveyed hundreds of SEND leaders involved in the programme.

The evaluation found evidence that three ways of working on SEND leadership were especially effective:

### Collaborating on strategic priorities

Our SEND school improvement work has consistently shown that the SENCO role can be isolated and isolating. In turn this too frequently leads to high levels of SENCO turnover.

However, we've also seen that when SENCOs in different local schools are supported to work together on a shared framework and language, their feelings of professional efficacy and satisfaction increase.

Indeed, Professor Garner's evaluation found that being supported to work in 'quads' gave participants the chance to share good practice, learn and grow together.

One participant told the evaluation team "it's maybe the first time that I've ever felt this supported". Another said "this is far more beneficial than most of the professional development we've had".

Trust-level SEND leads also describe the same benefits from working with peers in different trusts, in terms of their own development and in terms of the innovation that comes from exposure to different ways of defining the role and building systems.



### Developing strategic leadership skills

A common refrain from the many hundreds of SENCOs and school leaders we've worked with over the past few years is that the 'fire-fighting' and administrative demands of SEND leadership make it hard to give adequate attention to strategic planning.

Therefore, developing confident and capable strategic leaders of SEND in schools is key to meeting needs in the classroom.

The evaluation shows how following expert-led, structured guidance focusing on identifying and developing actions to meet strategic priorities helps drive school improvement.

SENCOs who took part in the evaluation reported that they became better leaders by:

- Prioritising and managing workload to save time for the most high-impact work (understanding what's happening in classrooms and boosting the kind of high-quality teaching that is essential for those with SEND and benefits all)
- Dovetailing with other leaders and ensuring SEND priorities are woven into whole-school development plans
- Focusing on shared leadership of teaching and learning, in addition to the more specialist elements of the SENCO role.

### Sharing strategic goals locally

Crucially, when this work is supported by LAs, there's an extra dimension. LA SEND leaders

can better identify common areas where schools could do with additional training, longer-term professional development or support.

Being part of the same common framework for strategic leadership and supporting groups of schools to work together on strategic priorities gives LAs the tools to direct resources to where they are most needed.

That resource needn't always be financial, or supplied by teams outside of schools. The evaluation shows how with the right frameworks, local authorities are better able to accurately recognise and disseminate best practice in schools and classrooms.

One LA leader told the evaluation team that the programme "provides a way of obtaining a consistent overview of our schools, which ends up linking to the actions that are then needed, so that it's not so much an end-point; it gets us into common territory for effective actions".

This evaluation showcases the effectiveness of Whole Education's approach to solving some of the entrenched issues with leading SEND in LAs, trusts and schools.

And now that it's tried and tested, the programme provides a model for how to help leaders in those settings come up with an impactful, collaborative and sustainable plan for action on SEND.

Week in

## Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

## MONDAY

Has Labour finally got its act together and developed a comms plan to deal with criticism of its reform agenda?

Ministers said four times during today's education questions that they will "fix the foundations" of various Conservative messes – getting groans from the now opposition at each mention.

There were also groans in the *Schools Week* newsroom over the chutzpah from some Conservative MPs throwing stones at Labour over funding.

Shadow education secretary Laura Trott said "every MP has heard from headteachers who are stressed beyond belief at how to manage their funding".

"Can the Secretary of State guarantee that worried headteachers up and down the country will not have to make teachers redundant because of her broken promises: yes or no?"

FYI: Trott had been a minister since 2022 of a Conservative government which, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies once put it, delivered "no growth in spending per pupil over 14 years". This was described as a feat "without precedent in recent history"!

## TUESDAY

Ofsted's consultation on its big inspection reforms closed at midnight on Monday, with the inspectorate telling us the consultation got more than 6,000 responses.

However, this is waaay less than the

20,000 for its Big Listen consultation, run last year to get wider views on Ofsted's work.

A sign lots have already lost faith again with the inspectorate and just not engaged?

## WEDNESDAY

New statistics on how often (or not) central government departments respond to freedom of information requests on time shows the DfE as the fifth worst offender.

The department was late in responding to one in every six FOIs it received last year, the figures show.

It makes its extraordinary FOI response to *Schools Week* asking for official minutes of a controversial meeting between Phillipson and "the country's strictest head"<sup>TM</sup> Katharine Birbalsingh seem even more remarkable.

FOIs should be responded to within 20 days. The DfE provided a response to our Birbalsingh meeting FOI in just four!

Since the department is so keen to publish details of its meetings, we asked for a copy of the minutes of a meet in March between Phillipson and Ofsted boss Sir Martyn Oliver to discuss inspection reforms.

However, the minutes were deemed to relate to the "formulation or development of government policy", so our request was rejected. (Well, we got a couple of largely uninformative words, alongside 150 redacted ones!)

## THURSDAY

A ground-breaking press release dropped into our inboxes today declaring that Ofqual, the exams regulator, has "pledged to ensure qualifications can be trusted for years to come by students, employers, and wider society" with a new three-year strategy.

The release is headlined: "Ofqual to guard qualification standards in the long term".

I mean, that is the literally THE point of Ofqual. It was created in 2010 to, as the regulator says, "secure standards in qualifications so they give a reliable and consistent indication of knowledge, skills and understanding".

So, Ofqual commits to doing its core job for another three years. More as we get it.

Perhaps we're being a bit \*too\* sassy?

For anyone interested, the regulator described its new approach as "stewardship".

Boss Sir Ian Bauckham said this was "an approach to regulation that is gaining interest around the world and takes a long-term, proactive view".

The body also identified five factors it believes will be particularly important over the next three years.

They include the "increased recognition" of special educational needs – which would involve mental health – the "continued growth" of technology and the government's "focus on improving efficiency".







## TRUST LEAD - MATHEMATICS

This is an exciting opportunity for an ambitious subject specialist to join the Curriculum team. Working from the Curriculum Centre and across our seven secondary academies, the Trust Subject Lead's primary responsibility is to work with heads of department on the implementation of Future Academies' common curriculum strategy.

The role of a Trust Subject Lead is a high-profile position that sets the standard for effective subject leadership and excellence in the classroom. Working as part of the central team, the Trust Subject Lead's primary responsibility is to work with heads of department on the implementation of Future Academies' common curriculum strategy at key stages 3 and 4.

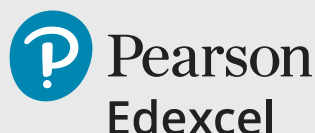
Beyond this, the Maths Lead will have a broader role in working with senior and middle leaders to shape Maths teaching and improve outcomes across the Trust. This will involve leading department reviews, overseeing subject-specific training for trainees, providing coaching and mentoring for Maths teachers at all stages of their career, and developing a strong network of Maths leaders and teachers.

Future Academies recognises its employees as the most important asset and critical to its success. To demonstrate this all staff are offered the following benefits:

- A supportive ethos and concern for the well-being of all colleagues.
- Excellent CPD opportunities and career progression.
- Employer Contributions to Local Government or Teachers Pension Scheme.
- Mintago – employee benefits platform.
- Employee Assistance Programme.
- Access to a Virtual GP
- Eye Care Voucher scheme.
- Partnership with YellowNest-Salary sacrifice childcare.

[Click here to find out more about the role and our staff benefits.](#)

Applications must be received no later than 9 am on 12th May



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