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DfE hasn't assessed impact of benefits cuts on school readiness pledge

- Disability reforms plunging more families in poverty 'will hit schools'
- Starmer's pledge to boost school readiness also impacted, say leaders

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The government promised “bold reform” to the broken special educational needs system. This week, we’re starting to see just how big those changes could be.

As we reveal on page 5 and 6, Labour has looked at their predecessor’s SEND improvement plan and concluded it’s not worth the paper it’s written on.

Despite taking three years to draw up, and a couple more to trial the reforms – the new government says it is all completely insufficient.

The flaw with the improvement plan was that it tried to fix a system that is broken.

It’s now clear Labour is looking to instead rip it up, and try to build something that works better for everyone (page 4).

Our exclusive about reforming the education, health and care plan (EHCP) system – the bedrock of the 2014 SEND reforms – shows the scale of change.

One consideration is that EHCPs – or perhaps some new iteration to replace them – become solely used for pupils in special schools.

Given the SEND system’s well-documented failures, “bold” reform is the right course. But if this does result in the end of EHCPs, then there are a few things that must happen.

EHCPs, no matter how many issues they have, are a cast-iron commitment to support our most vulnerable.

Any system that replaces them must ensure that this level of support is not watered down.

That will take a huge effort to upskill mainstream school staff, and fund the services required, to meet the challenge. An accountability system loaded against pupils with additional needs also need overhauling.

Labour must also provide clear communication and total clarity for parents on what the changes entail and, crucially, how they will result in their children getting a better deal.

Labour has failed (badly) to do any of this for its current school reforms, and been heavily criticised for it.

Hopefully government has learnt its lesson – because the stakes are too high to not get this right.

EDITOR’S NOTE: *Schools Week* reported last week Ofsted was mulling delaying the roll-out of new inspections.

After our piece, Ofsted told its inspectors our story was a “half truth”.

For the record: we fully stand by our journalism. Ofsted has had discussions about delays. They have even involved Department for Education staff.

We reported a delay was under consideration, and we were clear no final decision had been made. In its message to inspectors after our story, Ofsted ruled out any delay.

Ofsted if of course within its rights to communicate any final decision to its staff. But to suggest delays were never discussed is, at best, disingenuous.

Most read online this week:

1 [EHCP shake-up considered as part of SEND reforms, adviser confirms](#)

2 [Ditching EHCPs could result in better resource allocation](#)

3 [Ofsted mulls report card inspection delay](#)

4 [Calls for language GCSEs to be graded less harshly](#)

5 [Who are the stuck schools getting RISE support?](#)

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INTERVIEW: SEND

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EHCP shake-up considered for SEND reforms, adviser says

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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EXCLUSIVE

Officials are considering a shake-up of the education, health and care plan (EHCP) system that could lead to a narrowing or new structure of support, a government adviser has said.

Speaking to Schools Week at the Schools and Academies Show in London on Thursday, Dame Christine Lenehan said discussions were ongoing about whether EHCPs should only apply to special school pupils.

EHCPs stipulate the support schools are legally required to provide.

But the number of plans has ballooned from 294,758 in 2019-20 to 434,354 in 2023-24, with schools and other services struggling to keep up with demand.

Meanwhile, a Schools Week investigation in March exposed the poor quality of many plans, with inadequate funding short-changing schools and absent health and social care providers pushing more responsibility on to the education sector.

The government is drawing up reforms to the wider SEND sector, with speculation the whole system of EHCPs could be scrapped.

Asked about this, Lenehan – the government's "strategic adviser" on SEND – said: "Do I think the structure around EHCPs will change? Yes, I think it probably will, because it's not fit for purpose.

"Do I think we will still be able to recognise and support children's needs in any other structure? Yes."

She added that "most plans these days" were about getting children the education they deserved, "not necessarily about needing the additional factors that health and social care bring, which is what they were designed for."

When asked if she envisaged fewer EHCPs, she said: "Probably ... because that will take us back to original purpose."

'What is the purpose?'

Asked whether this would involve narrowing EHCPs to only apply to children in special schools and whether they had any place in mainstream, Lenehan said: "That's the conversation we're in the middle of.

"What is it? Where are the layers? What does it look like? Who are the children that actually



Dame Christine Lenehan

'Fewer EHCPs will take us back to original purpose'

need this? And what is the purpose of EHCPs? Are they delivering what they need to?

"And is the relationship in schools and local authorities in terms of putting the EHCP together and then delivering what the outcomes are, the right relationship with the right amount of stuff in."

Lenehan, the former chief executive of the Council for Disabled Children, also chairs three local authority SEND improvement boards. This enabled her to see it "through a local authority lens", she said.

"I see the huge amount of money we put on statutory assessment to get the EHCPs right, and then I look at the translation into school, and it's not working."

'We need to be bold and brave'

Speculation about changes to EHCPs has inevitably led to many families believing their children will lose provision. Are they right to worry?

"No," said Lenehan. "Any system that the government looks at will have a full consultation process, will go through quite a long way of getting there, and we'll have a long lead-in time in terms of implementation.

"And that will mean that within that process, you're actually protecting children's rights and entitlements."

Schools Week understand any transition to a new system would be gradually introduced so

any support did not end immediately.

One source said mainstream schools would also likely be expected to improve the reasonable adjustments they offered under such a system.

As of 2023-24, almost 240,000 pupils with EHCPs were educated in state-funded primary and secondary schools. Around 155,000 were in state special schools.

Lenehan said the wider challenge was "how bold and brave you want to be. Ministers have to work that through.

"There are so many people involved in this, and we're not going to make everyone happy. So we need to be bold and brave."

She added the reforms were looking at a "reset of expectations" about what the state "can and can't do".

"It has limitations, but we're not clear about those limitations."

However, Georgina Downard, a senior solicitor at the Independent Provider of Special Education Advice, told MPs on Tuesday that any approach or "suggestion of diluting" the support for pupils with special needs would be a "cause of significant national shame".

And Anna Bird, chair of the Disabled Children's Partnership, a coalition of 120 charities, said "the idea of scrapping plans will terrify families".

"Any conversation about replacing these plans should focus on how children's rights to an education will be strengthened, without the red tape and without the fight."

ANALYSIS: SEND

Three years in the making, but Labour savages SEND improvement plan

JOHN DICKENS

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The Conservative government's SEND improvement plan "did not go far enough" to resolve the major issues in the special needs system, the new government has said.

In a 17,000-word response to the education committee's SEND inquiry, Department for Education officials tore through the reforms – which were three years in the making.

They said they did not look hard enough" at wider barriers and "perverse" incentives to more inclusive schools.

Their submission gives a further insight into the government's thinking on where its own special needs reforms – due to be outlined this year – will end up.

It also reveals concerns that special needs provision will not be protected as more councils predict bankruptcies and pupils in overcrowded special schools get worse GCSE results.

Plan 'did not go far enough'

The previous government's SEND improvement plan – which took three years to draw up and cost £70 million to test – "did not go far enough", Labour has said.

The plan was billed as setting out "systemic reforms" that would ensure "every child gets the help they need".

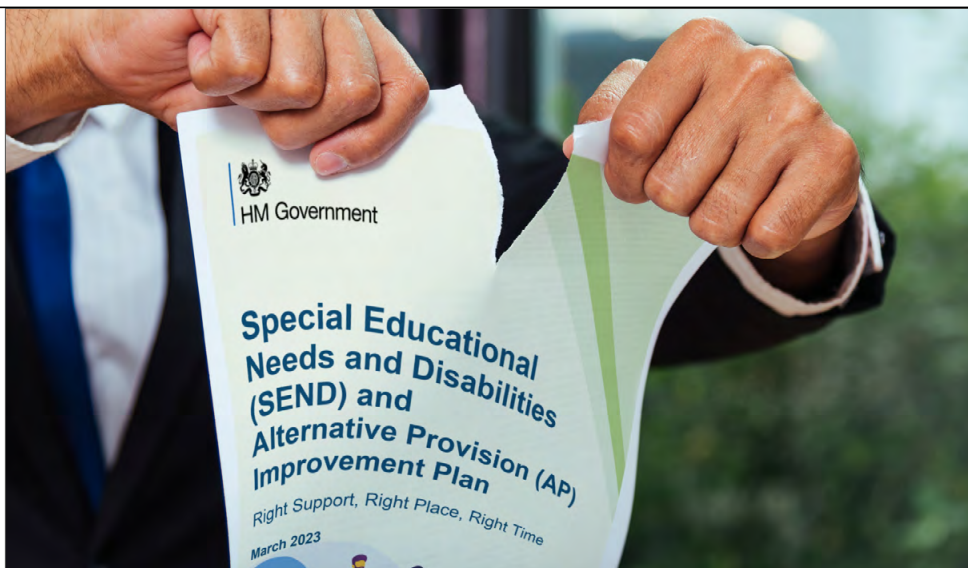
But Labour's submission to MPs picks apart many aspects of the plan, concluding: "Overall, it did not take a fundamental look at the underpinnings of the system that had caused the challenges in the first place, but sought to address the problems within that system."

'Didn't look hard enough at inclusion barriers'

The plan "did not commit clearly enough to an inclusive mainstream system, or look hard enough at wider barriers".

There were "mixed messages" about driving inclusion while creating "very large numbers" of new special school places.

Schools also believed the reforms "continued to rely on a model that looked only at individual needs, and made it hard to provide support for cohorts or groups of children – which they



'Plan did not look hard enough at wider barriers'

believed could be done more efficiently and effectively", officials said.

Meanwhile, the plan "did not address perverse incentives in things like the accountability framework that could discourage inclusion".

Councils told the government the plan asked them to "take responsibility" for a "much better and more consistent offer" for pupils with additional needs "without the levers to deliver it".

And parents "worried" reforms "implied a reduction in the guaranteed support offered by EHCPs without enough clarity on what would be offered instead".

£1bn safety-valve bailouts 'not effective enough'

...

Another key intervention was the safety-valve scheme. Councils with huge deficits on their SEND budgets were promised multi-year bailouts totalling £1 billion – in return for strict cost-saving measures.

But Labour has stopped new entrants to the scheme. Five agreements are also suspended, likely because councils have fallen behind on cuts.

The government said the scheme has "not been effective enough across the board given the scale of the challenge".

A lessons-learned report is due to be published this month.

... concern over SEND hit from council bankruptcy

Provision for special needs funding mostly comes from the dedicated and ring-fenced schools grant, which would not be directly impacted should a council issue a section 114 notice (which means it is effectively bankrupt).

But the government said councils "may have to reduce spend on any discretionary elements, like early intervention and preventative services" from non-ring-fenced budgets.

Such savings could "also adversely affect wider support functions such as workforce and home-to-school transport, putting the quality and/or effectiveness of SEND provision at risk, as well as wider impacts beyond education and high-needs".

Six top-tier councils have issued section 114 notices since 2020. They are not named, but in November 2021 Slough was found to have "significant concerns" over its SEND provision, a year after it issued a section 114.

Officials said they would provide support to "help mitigate" drops in provision in such cases.

Continued on next page

ANALYSIS: SEND

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But the outlook is bleak, with half of councils warning they are likely to issue a section 114 notice in the next five years, a poll for the Local Government Information Unit last year found.

'Will build on' £70m Change programme

The improvement plan included £70 million to trial reforms under the Change programme.

This included proposals for standardised EHCP templates, strengthened mediation, and multi-agency panels for plans. But while criticising the reforms, officials are still "considering how we can build on this".

The scheme was also helping officials "spot and address unintended consequences created by how the reforms interact together. Evidence will inform any future decision to legislate to require the whole system to deliver these changes."

Lower GCSEs in 'overcrowded' schools'

The submission outlined "some evidence that pupils in overcrowded settings – special or mainstream – typically have lower attainment", estimated as the equivalent of a two-percentage point reduction.

However, the government said it has not tested this against current special school attainment and capacity data.

Nearly two thirds of special schools are at or over capacity. Overcrowded schools have about 12 per cent more pupils than reported capacity.

The DfE did not respond to a request for comment.

One in 14 schools has a SEND unit

To increase capacity, the government is encouraging mainstream schools and councils to set up resourced provision and SEN units.

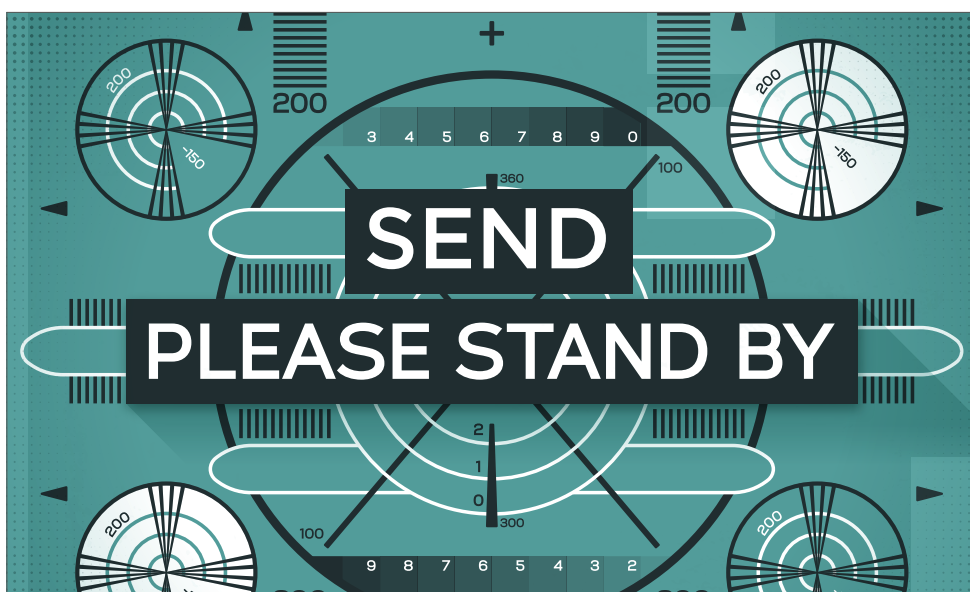
However, data shows just one in 14 schools nationally has one. There is also a big variability: one in seven secondaries has such provision, compared with one in 14 primaries.

The government also said some councils have no schools with SEN units, while other areas have one in every four schools.

But officials said they are keen to "scale up" best practice and "work with the sector to extend this across the system, including how SEN units and resourced provision can promote greater inclusion".

'No quick fixes' and 'more money not always the answer' ...

Officials said it was time for "bold reform", with a white paper due this year. The government



will focus on making mainstream schools more inclusive and early identification of SEND.

But there are "no quick fixes", with officials taking "a considered approach to deliver sustainable system reform".

The high-needs budget – which funds provision for pupils with additional needs – has risen £4 billion (up 60 per cent) from 2019 to 2024, but has still not kept pace with rising demand.

Councils have an estimated £3.3 billion deficit in their high-needs budgets, which is expected to keep rising.

But the government's submission said "more money is not always the answer (or an option)" given the "current fiscal challenges".

"What matters is how the money is spent, and what behaviours we are incentivising... In a steady state system, we should focus much more on how money is better spent to support an inclusive mainstream educational system, which meets children's needs and means that parents will no longer have to resort to highly individualised plans to support their children's needs."

... but (a reminder) of just how bad things are

The submission highlights how broken the SEND system is

The number of EHCP pupils in private SEND schools – which cost on average £62,000 per place compared with £24,000 in maintained special schools – has more than trebled to 15,620 since 2010.

The government admits this may be "indicative" of a mainstream system that is "decreasingly able" to meet the need" of SEND pupils, with the statutory EHCP process becoming "increasingly used to secure resources to meet need".

Nearly 5 per cent of pupils now have an EHCP/or an old "statement", up from 2.8 per cent in 2010.

But this varies hugely from 2.1 per cent in some councils last year, to 7.1 per cent in others.

Meanwhile in Essex, just 1 per cent of EHCPs were issued within the 20-week legal limit, compared with 100 per cent in Wandsworth, south London.

Better SEND 'system health' indicators planned

Given the outlook, the government wants to improve its data around SEND and alternative provision. It will "take stock of our system health indicators, data flows as well as the regular data and insights needed as we embark on a programme of reform. We will make this an integral part of programme governance going forward."

The DfE did not provide more details.

Surge in kids in unregistered settings

There has been a rise of nearly a third in the number of children in unregistered AP in one year, up to 27,060 from 20,390 in 2022-23.

A Schools Week investigation in 2023 revealed children as young as five were increasingly sent to unregulated institutions, where teachers had neither qualifications nor criminal record checks.

In its submission, the government said it wants AP to stop focusing "exclusively on expensive long-term placements" and focus instead on three tiers: targeted support for mainstream, time-limited placements for those in need of "more intensive support" and transitional placements for those reintegrating back into mainstream.

APs providing expertise to mainstream schools would also help "reduce numbers of preventable exclusions".



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INVESTIGATION: SCHOOL READINESS

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Benefits cuts threaten school-readiness target

RHI STORER

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EXCLUSIVE

Ministers have not assessed the impact savage cuts to disability benefits – plunging 250,000 more people into poverty – will have on their school-ready metric, part of Labour's education opportunity mission. Sir Keir Starmer has set a target that 75 per cent of children will have a “good” level of development by the time they start school in 2028. The proportion is currently 68 per cent. But education leaders say reforms to disability benefits could threaten that target.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) estimates 3.2 million families across Great Britain will be affected under plans to tighten personal independence payments.

It says another 250,000 will fall below the poverty line in 2030, including 50,000 children.

But in a parliamentary question, the DfE it had not assessed how this would impact its school readiness target.

Dan Thomas, the chief executive of the Learning Partnership Academies Trust, called it “short-sighted”.

“Early intervention, that first 1,000 days, if there's money cut from that through disability benefits we're going to see an increase in school readiness issues,” he told Schools Week.

Boosting school readiness is one of six “milestones” in Labour's “plan for change”.

Last year, 67.7 per cent of children were judged to have a “good” level of development across areas such as language, personal development, maths and literacy.

But pupils eligible for free school meals were 20.5 percentage points less likely to reach a “good” level before starting school.

In a poll of more than 2,500 primary teachers by Teacher Tapp, commissioned by Save The Children, 80 per cent said they did not think the government was likely to meet its 75 per cent target by 2028.

This rose to 86 per cent among headteachers.

Barbara Middleton, the head of Shiremoor primary in Newcastle, said the target was not “achievable”.

“A lot of my parents have dyslexia or ADHD. A lot of my children do as well... that could have a huge impact in terms of two or three people in the household



Sir Keir Starmer

‘A lot of disadvantage masquerades as additional needs’

who have [benefit] claims that may affect the household income quite significantly.

“There's so many different implications in terms of their mental health, the stress and anxiety it places upon them.”

Thomas said there was a “massive link between disadvantage and school readiness, but it goes way further than that”.

Pupils were increasingly “presenting as having additional needs. But because the assessments haven't taken place – a lot of that disadvantage factor is masquerading as additional needs.”

To counteract this, his trust's schools were “actively lowering” their age range and setting up internal provision for those not ready for school.

“There's nowhere for these children to access it if we don't do that.”

Middleton said staff at her school, where the lowest age of entry is three, have already changed 600 nappies this year.

“Every time someone changes a nappy, they're not directly working with children.”

Research by early years charity Kindred also found 51 per cent of parents and 46 per cent of teachers thought the cost-of-living crisis was affecting school readiness, because parents were forced to work longer hours.

Eighty-three per cent of teachers believed the

crisis would have a significant impact this year, while 77 per cent thought it would still be felt in the next three to five years.

Meanwhile, Liz Bartholomew, the head of Mayflower primary school in Essex, said the lack of support from wider support services hindered progress. Health visitor services in her area were a “year behind schedule”.

Parents brought four and five-year-olds to school in pushchairs, while other children were not toilet-trained.

Schools did need to adapt to the changing needs of children, “but we can't adapt without the money and the resources to do it”, she said.

Lucy Bannister, the head of policy at the anti-poverty charity Turn2us, said benefits' cuts would impact whole households. “All children should have a good start in life and when vital support is taken away, the whole household feels the impact.”

The DWP and DfE did not want to comment. In a letter to the education committee earlier this month, Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, said a “further programme of analysis and consultation with key impacted groups to support development of the proposals” would be done in the coming months.

She said the child poverty taskforce was “looking at all available levers” to reduce hardship.



Dan Thomas



Liz Bartholomew

Where are we on Labour's mental health promises?

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

Almost one million more young people will get access to school mental health support this year. Does that mean the government is delivering its pledges? Schools Week takes a look ...

1. Specialist mental health professionals in every school – but not until 2030

The government pledged to provide access to mental health professionals in every school so “every young person has access to early support to address problems before they escalate”.

The Department for Education today said half of all schools now have access to a mental health support team (MHST).

Funding of £49 million will enable the teams to reach 60 per cent of schools – an extra 900,000 pupils – by March next year.

Rollout will be “prioritised based on NHS identification of local need” to reach the most vulnerable children first.

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, said expanding support was “one of the single biggest steps we can take to improve children's life chances, make sure all pupils are getting the very most out of school and deliver excellence for every child”.

However, the government said it would not reach its pledge to reach every school until 2029-30 – the end of parliament.

MHSTs are made up of specialists trained by the NHS. They aim to identify and tackle mental health issues early on, using interventions “from group sessions to build children's resilience to 1:1s helping to manage anxiety”.

But Place2Be, the children's mental health charity, said the teams were “really only one part of the solution. Alone, [they] won't be enough to truly meet the government's manifesto commitment...nor effectively tackle the mental health difficulties facing young people today”.

It was also “vital” that young people could also access “high-quality, targeted clinical support at their school”.



2. 8,500 new mental health staff – but is it enough?

Labour pledged to recruit “an additional 8,500 new staff” to help treat both children and adults. There have been no further details about the timeline.

A damning report by the British Medical Association (BMA) published last June, the month before Labour took office, highlighted the “declining state” of England's mental health workforce.

It had seen “little growth” in the past decade, while the number of people using mental health services had soared 21 per cent since 2016.

NHS England figures show the hospital and community health services (HCHS) mental health workforce remained at about 109,000 between 2013 and 2017. But it has climbed steeply in recent years and was at 157,000 in December. Nurses and health visitors made up most of the increase.

But Dr Andrew Molodyski, the BMA's mental health policy lead, said the rise was “nowhere near fast enough to meet the sharp rise in demand” for children's mental health services.

Andy Bell, the chief executive at the Centre for Mental Health, said 8,500 more workers could end up being a “slower rate of increase than the past five years”.

The government said new mental health support team workers would form part of this figure.

Stephen Kinnock, the health minister, said in January that the staff on the teams must have “at least a level three vocational qualification, or equivalent level of relevant study”.

But Dr Sebastien Chapleau, an assistant director of Citizens UK, said this fell below what was needed to support those who would otherwise end up on CAMHS waiting lists.

Teams should feature professionally trained counsellors who could offer a greater depth of support, the group said this week in letter to Bridget Phillipson.

3. Reducing mental health waiting times – but by how much?

In its election manifesto, Labour said waiting lists for mental health support were “too high”, and “shamefully so” for young people. The party pledged to “bring waiting times down and intervene earlier”.

A lack of public data makes progress unclear.

The children's commissioner is due to publish her annual report on the state of children's mental health services this weekend.

The report “presents a mixed picture” for children seeking mental health support, said a

Continued on next page

NEWS: POLICY

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spokesperson, with waiting times remaining an issue for “thousands of children”.

However, data in the commissioner’s report will only go up to April 2024, before Labour took office.

YoungMinds analysis of NHS England data showed a 52 per cent increase in young people waiting more than a year for CAMHS support – rising from 51,866 in 2022-23, to 78,577 in 2023-24.

Olly Parker, the head of external affairs at YoungMinds, said many young people still “face long waits while their mental health deteriorates”.

4. Hubs in every community – but millions needed

Labour pledged to create a new national network of “Young Futures” hubs, which would tackle knife crime and rising mental health issues by providing “open access” mental health services.

Lauded last year as a major prevention-focused reform rather than a “sticking plaster”, Yvette Cooper, the home secretary, said there would be a targeted programme in every area. The hubs would be open to young people aged 11 to 24, providing early intervention through drop-in services.

In March, Youth Access said there were “over

60” of the hubs across the country, but they were not yet “universally available”.

It estimated £169 to £210 million of annual funding was needed “to roll out a hub in every local area”, with an extra £74 to £121 million needed for set-up costs.

It urged the government to “commit to a multi-year funding package” in the upcoming spending review.

Neither the DfE nor health department responded to Schools Week’s question about how many hubs are now open, how many are planned, and the roll-out timeline.

Meanwhile, critics have said asking young people to access mental health support outside schools was “a recipe for disaster”.

Chapleau said he feared young people “won’t go” and that it was “much better to integrate things within school”.



Bridget Phillipson

‘We’re working to raise healthiest generation of children’

Phillipson said the government was “already turning the tide” on the mental health crisis after inheriting a system “full of challenges”.

Mental health took a major hit during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly among young people.

An NHS England study in 2023 found 21 per cent of 8 to 16-year-olds had a “probable” mental health problem – seven percentage points higher than in 2017.

Meanwhile, cuts to services have left schools shouldering the burden. A Teacher Tapp poll of more than 2,600 teachers last year found 84 per cent were spending an increasing amount of time helping pupils with mental health issues.

A DfE study published this week has also suggested a “causal” link between mental ill health and children missing school.

The government has committed to investing an extra £680 million in mental health services, with a health department spokesperson pledging that “every child should have access to mental health support”.

They also said the “world’s first” 24/7 mental health crisis support services had been launched.

“Through our Plan for Change, we will raise the healthiest generation of children in our history by reforming the NHS to give mental health the same attention and focus as physical health.”

SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER | @SCHOOLSWEEK

Attendance and behaviour hubs merged (and new ambassadors)

Five hundred schools will get “intensive support” from new joint attendance and behaviour hubs, the government has announced, with a new team of ambassadors set to be appointed to help cut school absences.

Applications are set to open today for 90 “best of the best” lead schools for the new hubs. They will start in September, before a full roll-out in January. Each hub will support six schools.

Schools in line for support will have “significant attendance and behaviour challenges”. It is not clear how they will be chosen, but the hubs will “work alongside” the government’s regional school improvement teams.

Hubs will also support 4,500 more



Tom Bennett

schools via training, events and open days, the government said.

Two new attendance and behaviour ambassadors will also be appointed to provide the “link between schools and the government, identifying challenges and working jointly toward solutions”.

The DfE told *Schools Week* that Tom Bennett, the former behaviour tsar, and Rob Tarn, the attendance tsar, were no longer in the position but were welcome to reapply.

The new scheme will get £1.5 million – significantly less than the schemes it replaces.

Launched in 2021, the previous got £10 million in funding and supported more than 650 schools and trusts through one or two-year plans.



Rob Tarn

An evaluation last year found pupils reported behaviour had got slightly worse over the first term of the scheme, but those at schools with higher deprivation levels said it had slightly improved.

However, staff reported much more “positive” change in behaviour, and also felt “more supported”.

Meanwhile, the attendance hub scheme – launched in 2022, but without any funding – also included the attendance action alliance.

Headed by Gillian Keegan, a former education secretary, it included leaders from education and health, police and children’s organisations.

It has not met since March 2024.

ON LOCATION: SAASHOW



Stuck schools accountable if RISE advice falls flat

Stuck schools will be held accountable for their own improvement – even if support brokered by the government RISE teams fails to turn them around.

The improvement divisions will instead be charged with making “sure delivery is happening” and “monitoring plans”, said John Edwards, the DfE’s director general.

Speaking at the Schools and Academies Show in London on Thursday, he said: “The current responsible body [the school’s trust or council] is accountable for the improvement. The responsible body owns the improvement journey, and this is a process of providing support packages to enable that to be accelerated.”

This was a “starting principle” that has “been really important” for Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary.

Forty-five new advisers this month joined the 20 in post since February.

The expanded team will start working with more than 200 schools deemed “stuck” for receiving a ‘requires improvement’ Ofsted grade, following an earlier below-good judgment.

But there has been confusion around where accountability will sit for ensuring the improvement works.

Slides shown during Edwards’s talk show that once a school becomes eligible for support, the RISE teams will assess its “capacity to improve”.

If it is thought to need help, it will be matched with a “high-quality organisation and be considered for funded intervention”. An improvement plan will then be “co-constructed” with the responsible body.

Edwards stressed the “responsible body owns the improvement journey”, and that it will have to ensure the plan “bites”.

“The RISE advisers’ job is not to deliver the improvement; [their] job is to engage in that matching process, making sure we’ve identified the right areas that need support and making sure delivery is happening.”

Edwards said they would look at data, inspection outcomes and “understand where the best evidence of provision is” to choose organisations.

“We also use our intelligence on capacity. Then there are also particular specialists, so we will be drawing on local knowledge.”



John Edwards

Schools could face tribunal penalties



Schools and councils face penalties if they do not follow beefed-up rules on evidence for SEND tribunals from July, a judge has warned, under a change enacted because of an increase in “irrelevant” information.

Guidance on the preparation of evidence bundles has existed for many years. But a senior tribunal judge told the Schools and Academies Show the tribunal had been forced to issue a mandatory “practice direction”.

Record numbers of parents are appealing council refusals to issue education, health and care plans (EHCPs), with nearly all winning their challenges.

In some cases, schools are required to prepare evidence for the tribunal.

Judge Meleri Tudur said the advent of more digital working, freedom of information and subject access requests meant more people were demanding files from the local authority “and then submitting them all, regardless of whether they are relevant or not”.

She also described receiving “threads of emails” and other communications.

The direction limits core bundles to 100 pages and supplementary evidence to 200. It also stipulates that copies of correspondence and email threads between the parties should not be included “unless relevant to a specific issue”.

Tudur said page limits had existed for years, but were now “enforceable”, because “people are sending us information that’s irrelevant”.

Blank forms and pages, multiple copies of the same document and professional and school reports more than three years old at the time of the appeal are also banned.

Senior civil servants at DfE ‘don’t know very much about education’

Officials moving between government departments has “eroded” capacity in the civil service, the head of England’s largest academy trust has warned.

Sir Jon Coles, the chief executive of United Learning, told the Schools and Academies Show that senior civil servants at the DfE “just don’t know very much about education”.

Coles, a former director-general for schools at the department, said: “There’s an issue with DfE capability, which is not political [but] about the civil service”.

He said he remembered a time when “the school people...spent their entire lives working on something about education – they built a

career around that and they had real depths of expertise”.

But a new trend of “moving around between departments” had become “valued in the civil service”.

“So you’ve got a lot of very senior people in the department who are just as bright, just as capable, just as well-motivated as anybody ever has been...[but] just don’t know very much about education.

“The civil service’s ability to identify serious problems, work out what the policy solutions are, propose them, and be proactive has disappeared.”

INVESTIGATION: FUNDING

How trusts are 'caught in a trap' on school reserves

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

The government is concerned that 64 trusts are stockpiling cash by sitting on reserves of up to 140 per cent of their annual income.

But no action has been taken in any case, with most trusts saying the money has been built up to fund construction projects or to shield their schools from financial uncertainties.

One trust has invested most of its reserves into high-interest gilts, with earnings now funding central team staff.

With school budgets coming under increasing pressure, the findings have reignited debate about what level of school reserves should be deemed appropriate.

Andrew Pilmore, of DRB Schools and Academies Services, warned leaders were "caught in a trap of being very cautious as they don't know what's round the corner" politically and financially.

"If you want schools to be willing to spend their surpluses, they need to be secure. If they don't do that then in three, four years, they've got a financial notice to improve for having very low reserves – it only takes a couple of big issues."

The trusts with huge reserves

The Department for Education released "good practice" guidance on academy trust reserves in 2023 after the National Audit Office (NAO) ordered officials to investigate those building up "substantial sums".

The guidance states a high level of reserves equates to "20 per cent of income or above". The NAO found 22 per cent of trusts met this threshold in 2019-20.

Government policy is to contact those with "high levels" of reserves to seek reassurances.

Last year, the first crackdown since the new guidance, the DfE wrote to 64 trusts. The letters were based on information from 2022-23.

Data obtained through freedom of information shows 13 were sitting on reserves that equated to more than 40 per cent of their annual income.

"To have very high reserves is almost as bad as having no reserves," said Micon Metcalfe, a school finance expert.

"Most school income is to be spent in the year in which it's allocated, so if reserves have got very large, the question is: are the resources being spent effectively for the education of those children?"



'High reserves are almost as bad as no reserves'

Schools Week analysis suggests Ashton West End Primary Academy in Tameside had the highest level of reserves, with £3.9 million savings representing 140 per cent of income.

Accounts show it anticipated allocating part of this "over the next three years to maintaining educational standards throughout the academy, including appropriate staffing levels and to renewing parts of the... infrastructure".

What's left "will be held as the contingency and to support future strategies and initiatives... and mitigate against future risks including diminishing funding levels".

It was followed by The Specialist Education Trust (121 per cent), the only other trust in which reserves were higher than income.

Projected five-year budgets for the Slough-based SAT "show a need to hold reserves... as funding becomes tighter and staffing costs increase through pay rises, increased [National Insurance] costs and increased pension contributions together with inflationary pressures".

It might also use the money to meet "unforeseen costs, such as repairs, maintenance, or essential equipment replacement... without disrupting educational services".

Analysis suggests Ashton West

End's and the Specialist Education Trust's reserves fell in 2023-24.

'This money isn't just sitting around'

Three of the trusts contacted by the DfE were sitting on reserves of more than £10 million. Brampton Manor in east London had £33.8 million in 2022-23, equalling 80 per cent of its total income. This was the highest amount of any trust – and reserves rose last year.

The trust – which runs two academies – did not respond to our requests for comment. But it did concede in accounts "these reserves may appear high", but "are not excessive and are necessary in the light of the uncertainty in funding".

Cockburn Multi Academy Trust in Leeds and the Bradford-based Carlton Academy Trust held £22.5 million and £11.2 million respectively.

Cockburn said its reserves were being used "strategically to build long-term resilience, improve educational opportunities, and foster sustainable growth across its schools".

Carlton's rose to £14.2 million in 2023-24. Adrian Kneeshaw, its chief executive, said about £12 million had since been invested in long-term gilts – government bonds perceived to be "low-risk" investments.

He expected to deliver a return of about £570,000 a year on



Micon Metcalfe

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION: FUNDING

the investment.

“The money’s not just sitting around. We use that annual return to fund a substantially expanded central services team – for example, we recruited three secondary subject directors.”

Trusts are allowed to invest cash as long as they have a policy and ensure “security of funds takes precedence over revenue maximisation”.

A report by the Kreston group of accountancy firms this year showed trusts now generate £26 per pupil, on average, through investment, up from £7 per pupil a year earlier.

This comes as “many” trusts with “significant” savings start to “deplete them, some... at quite a rapid rate”, said Andi Brown of the academy consultancy SAAF Education.

Dire capital cash necessities higher reserves

The government said “around 90 per cent of trusts hold reserves of at least 5 per cent of total income”. But they have “the flexibility to maintain a level of reserves that trustees decide is appropriate”.

High level of reserves could be down to “specific needs – for example, upcoming contributions to capital projects”, they added.

However, it would be “unusual and potentially hard... to justify the decision to hold significant reserves at this level for general cashflow contingency, given this funding could be used sooner for the benefit of pupils”.

Unity Education Trust said its £8.1 million reserves will fund refurbishment at its AP sites over the next 18 months.

Once this is accounted for, its reserve levels were “less than 20 per cent” of income.

The Kreston report said reserves of 10 per cent were more appropriate given the inadequate access to government cash for capital projects,

The trusts that the government contacted on average ran 2.5 schools. More than half were single-academy trusts, while one had more than 10 schools.

Phil Reynolds, of the audit firm PLR Advisory, said the smaller the trust the greater the risk of collapse. “All it takes is one of your schools to go a bit wrong and that will have a massive impact. You’re going to have a mindset of being ultra-cautious with your budgeting.”

Adrian Packer, the chief executive of CORE Education Trust in Birmingham, said his organisation “inherited significant debt” after four of its academies joined from a “failing



Government crackdown: Trusts with the biggest reserves

Trust	Schools	2022-23 reserves	Reserves as % of income	2023-24 reserves	Reserves as % income
Brampton Manor Trust	2	£33.8m	80%	£37.8m	84%
Cockburn Multi Academy Trust *	5	£22.5m	78%	-	-
Carlton Academy Trust	6	£11.2m	44%	£14.2m	33%
Core Education Trust	4	£8.9m	30%	£9.5m	30%
Unity Education Trust	15	£7.9m	25%	£8.1m	25%

* 2023-24 accounts for Cockburn could not be found.
Nerd note: The government launched its crackdown last year, basing reserves figures on those in 2022-23 accounts.
School numbers are as of August 2023

SCHOOLS WEEK

trust” in 2018.

The MAT had “reserves in place for any further unforeseen costs of which there have been several already”.

These were “expected to decline over the next few years as we reinvest in our schools and facilities to ensure they are fit for purpose”, he said.

Brown also said that “the fact we don’t always know about grants or the methodology behind them until late in the day makes it incredibly difficult to budget”.

The £1.5 million reserves of the small Michaela Community Schools Trust in north London equated to 25 per cent of income, according to our analysis.

Meanwhile, others need it to grow.

The Ambitious About Autism Schools Trust in London, where reserves were once just under 70 per cent of income, has been expanding. Reserves “fund new developments, [provide] working capital and [help] to manage risk”, said Paul Breckell, its deputy chief executive.

Its reserves have since fallen to 57 per cent of income and will keep falling “in a managed way as we invest in growth”.

Are councils clawing back excesses?

While it’s not possible to compare individual schools with trusts, latest government figures show authority-maintained school reserves represented 7 per cent of total income, on average, last year.

Just over half of council schools



with surpluses had reserves deemed “excessive”. Thresholds for this are set locally by councils.

Schools in Slough had the highest level of reserves on average at 18 per cent.

Guidance produced by the authority said its officers would review schools’ plans for the cash if they exceeded a threshold of between 5 and 8 per cent. Amounts “not fully supported by evidence will be considered as potentially subject to clawback”.

An Education Policy Institute (EPI) study from 2019 showed more than half of excessive reserves in council schools were already committed to specific projects.

But if the “excess” was fully redistributed to schools in the red, then funding deficits would be wiped out in four-fifths of authorities.

Could surpluses be redistributed?

Jon Andrews, the EPI’s head of analysis, said it was not “unreasonable to consider whether money that’s there should be redistributed, though that’s not without policy challenges”.

Academy trusts are already able to do this, by pooling their schools’ general annual grant funding and redistributing it based on their own metrics.

DfE data suggests trusts were sitting on just under £3.5 billion in 2022-23. Eighty-seven per cent of chains were in an overall surplus, while just 2 per cent had slipped into the red.

The DfE confirmed no further action was required for any of the 64 trusts it engaged with over reserves.

It said the work “ensures trusts have plans in place to use their funds to deliver outcomes that benefit pupils ... trusts are planning effectively to mitigate against unforeseen issues and are investing in their current and future pupils’ education”.

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NEWS: ATTENDANCE

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'Tipping points' key to tackling pupil absence

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS & RHI STORER
@SCHOOLSWEEK

Pupils may face absence "tipping points" during their time in school where measures to boost attendance could cut absence rates in the future, government analysis suggests.

The Department for Education said its findings "underscore the importance of targeted interventions during the critical transition from primary to secondary school, particularly for pupils with 10 to 15 per cent absence".

Another paper suggests there may also be a "self-reinforcing" relationship between increased prevalence of mental ill health and rising absence among school pupils, but more up-to-date research is needed.

Past absence predicts future

The DfE has published two studies on attendance. The first compared data from the 2022-23 academic year with that of 2021-22.

It found that, once a pupil's absence rose above a certain level in one year, they were more likely to have high rates of absence later in school.

Across all year groups, those with absence between 0 and 5 per cent were "highly likely" to have strong attendance the next year.

Among primary pupils with more than 15 per cent absence in one year, 60 per cent had "persistent" or "severe" absence the following year. Persistent absence means missing a day a fortnight. Severe absence means missing more school than the pupil attends.

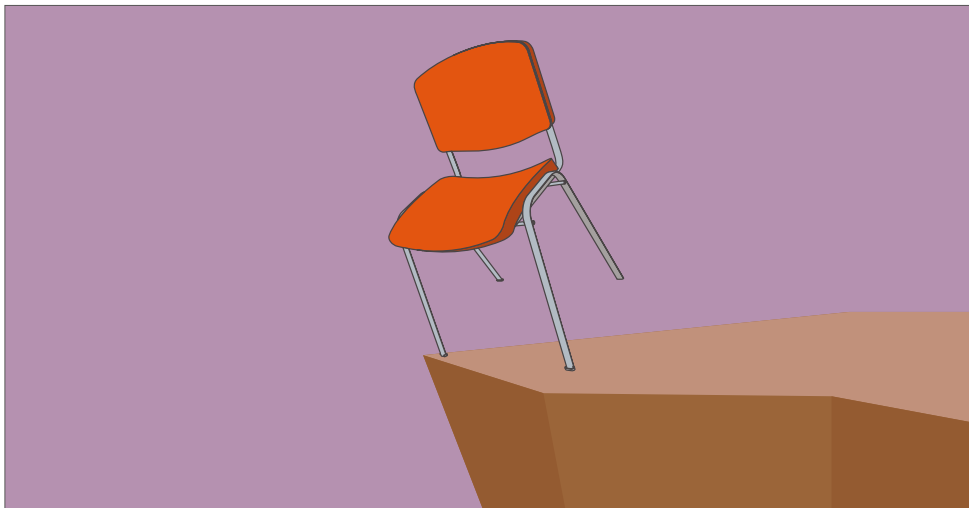
The figure rose for pupils who had over 15 per cent absence in year 6. Seven in 10 of those pupils had persistent or severe absence. The figure for all secondary pupils was 80 per cent.

Secondary transition 'critical'

The findings "imply that there may be absence 'tipping points' during a pupil's time at school where improved attendance could lead to improved future attendance – however more analysis is required to establish the long-term effects of attendance interventions".

A "significant tipping point" is observed in the 10 to 15 per cent absence band, "particularly at the transition to secondary school".

In year 7, the percentage of pupils with increasing absence rates is "twice as high" as in



year 1. By year 8, this percentage rises to "nearly three times" the year 1 level.

"This suggests that the transition to secondary school is a critical period, with a steep and sustained rise in absence rates from year 7 onwards."

Mental health a 'causal factor'

Another study examined the relationship between rising prevalence of mental ill health and rising absence among pupils.

Pupil absence has soared since the Covid-19 pandemic, reaching 7.2 per cent across schools in the last academic year. In 2023-24, one in five pupils missed 10 per cent or more of lessons – nearly double the rate seen before the pandemic.

There has also been a marked increase in mental health issues among young people. An NHS England study in 2023 found 21 per cent of eight to 16-year-olds had a probable mental health problem – seven percentage points higher than in 2017.

The DfE used findings from large surveys carried out among year 9 pupils in the 2012-13 academic year, and the two subsequent years. It then looked at these pupils' attendance data for that final year, when they were in year 11, to see if it was possible to "predict" absenteeism based on factors such as their mental health, wellbeing and socioeconomic circumstances.

The study found mental health was "one of the casual factors of absence" for year 11 students. Poorer mental health strongly predicts authorised absences, it found.

"The odds of being absent for authorised

reasons increase as the student's mental health becomes worse, with the amount of school being missed being strongly related to poorer mental health."

A 'self-reinforcing cycle'?

But the DfE said its analysis "also shows that previous absence strongly predicts future absence", as was found in the more recent research.

"Therefore, it may be that there is a self-reinforcing cycle occurring."

Unauthorised absences were not well predicted by poor mental health, the study found. Other factors such as socioeconomic variables, including free school meals eligibility, or special educational needs were better at predicting unauthorised absence rates.

Children from single-parent homes were also more likely to miss lessons than those from two-parent households.

Pupils who reported they enjoyed school less "were more likely to be absent for both authorised and unauthorised reasons".

The results also suggest that pupils who enjoy school have better mental health and lower absence rates.

The study used data from before the Covid-19 pandemic, and the DfE stressed that future studies should be carried out, to "replicate the findings in the current context".

It said future research to explore "which interventions are most effective in improving students' mental health and encouraging school attendance" is also crucial.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Charities that support private schools investigated

Three charities that support private Jewish schools are being investigated by the Charity Commission over "serious concerns" about cashed cheques.

An unannounced HMRC visit to a company in Hackney found 105 charities had cashed cheques worth £22 million with the firm between December 2021 and March 2023.

The commission this week launched a "statutory class inquiry" into 10 of the charities.

Three that donate to private Jewish schools – the Beis Aharon Charitable Trust Limited, Friends of Beis Soroh Schneier and Friends of Beis Chinuch Lebonos Trust – have been issued with "an immediate order" to "temporarily stop" issuing cheques without commission consent.



Investigations will look at how trustees had "oversight of what happened to funds exchanged for the cheques, and if this cash has been used properly to support what the charities were set up to do", said the watchdog.

[Full story here](#)

Three more years for SEND sports programme

The government is extending a sports initiative for pupils with SEND for another three years.

The "Inclusion 2028" programme will give 10,000 teachers and practitioners at 8,000 schools the skills to improve PE and sport for more than 240,000 pupils with special needs. It will also help set up another 600 extra-curricular clubs.

A previous scheme, Inclusion 2024, ran for three years from 2021, partnering a network of 50 schools with the Youth Sport Trust to help deliver lessons "that meet the diverse needs of all pupils – including those with physical, sensory, cognitive, communication or social and emotional needs".



Schools Week understands the £300,000 funding for the first year is consistent with the previous programme, but that it will be expected to reach more schools. Funding for future years will be confirmed as part of the spending review.

[Full story here](#)

Key stage 2 teachers wanted for EEF study of AI

Schools are being invited to take part in a new trial to assess whether AI-powered lesson planning can reduce teacher workload while also maintaining quality.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) will fund a randomised-controlled trial of Aila, the Oak National Academy's AI lesson planning assistant.

About 450 key stage 2 teachers from 86 primary schools are sought for the study.

Participants will be assigned to one of two groups. Some will be asked to use Aila for planning their lessons across all subjects,

with the rest sticking with their usual lesson planning.

The trial, which will be evaluated by the National Foundation for Educational Research, will measure teacher workload based on average time spent on planning over one term.

Lesson quality will be assessed by an independent panel, which will not be told if AI was used.

The results will be published in autumn next year.

[Full story here](#)

Commission calls for training standards on restraint



The government must create national training standards on restraint as part of new guidance on the use of reasonable force in schools, the equalities watchdog has said.

The standards should "reflect human rights law and standards, such as the requirement for a lawful basis for restraint and the requirements to be necessary and proportionate".

The Equality and Human Rights Commission also warned "imprecise" definitions of "reasonable force" and "seclusion" could place teachers and children in "jeopardy".

The watchdog has published its response to the government's consultation, which ran until April this year, on the "use of reasonable force and other restrictive interventions in schools".

Its draft guidance, the first update since 2013, stated schools should prioritise de-escalation over restraint and record every "significant" use of force and report to parents "as soon as practicable".

A poll found almost half of schools agreed that "clear, nationally-agreed standards for training would help them".

Analysis of family testimony concluded the number of restrictive interventions was "higher when staff had received training".

John Kirkpatrick, chief executive of the EHRC, said while the proposed guidance aligns with their own framework, there were still 'significant gaps'.

"The proposed guidance positions important considerations like necessity and proportionality as optional, where they are in fact legally required. This potentially places both staff and children in jeopardy."

[Full story here](#)

NEWS

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Lunches of less than half an hour in 11% of schools

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

More than one in 10 schools allow children less than 30 minutes for lunch, an increase on six years ago, new polling suggests.

A Teacher Tapp survey also found that the food served up by primaries and secondaries was “poorly received” by teachers and pupils alike.

Up to a quarter of children also revealed that they do their only exercise for the week at school.

June Stevenson, of Teacher Tapp, said: “Pupils clearly care a lot about their lunchtimes, but too many of them struggle for sufficient time to eat, socialise and enjoy activities.

“Teachers tell us how much they care too, and 60 per cent tell us they experience lunchtime issues impacting on afternoon learning time.”

The study, based partially on polling of teachers and partially on school surveys of pupils and parents, suggested lunches lasted for less than 30 minutes in 11 per cent of schools. In secondaries, the figure stood at 14 per cent.

In comparison, UCL-Nuffield research from 2019



suggested the figure stood at 8 per cent.

Just 11 per cent of secondary teachers reported having lunchtimes of an hour or longer, according to the Teacher Tapp study, compared to 30 per cent of primaries.

When asked if they would prefer a longer break in the middle of the day if it meant finishing later, 37 per cent of pupils aged 11 and above answered “yes”. But 45 per cent said “no”.

Despite this, the majority said they usually had enough time to eat.

Teacher Tapp added that “food seems to be

poorly received”, with only half of youngsters describing lunch as “tasty” and a quarter saying they were given enough to eat.

Over a fifth of teachers said the food was not “good enough for them to give to a child they care about”.

The results come at a time when funding for free school meals has not kept pace with food, staffing and energy cost rises, and leaders face increasing pressures from the rising cost of external suppliers.

Meanwhile, 41 per cent of teachers reported they had “pupils in their class regularly too hungry to learn because they have not had enough food”.

This rose to 68 per cent for those working in schools “in the top quartile for numbers of pupils eligible for free school meals”.

Almost 25 per cent of primary pupils told the pollsters that “they do their only physical playing or exercise for the week at school”. This fell to 18 per cent in secondaries.

Most schools lacked the resources to offer “structured activities involving all or most pupils”, Teacher Tapp noted.



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Surrey's block on education communications angers MPs

CHAMINDA JAYANETTI

@CJAYANETTI

EXCLUSIVE

Surrey council's decision to "restrict" communications about constituents' education is "deeply troubling", say MPs in the county.

Last week, the council emailed 13 local MPs to say the local authority "will no longer provide a response to individual cases where a more appropriate alternative route is available" on SEND, school transport and admissions.

The letter was sent by Clare Curran, Surrey's cabinet member for children, families and lifelong learning.

She told Schools Week the move was to "remind them that the correct process for families who are dissatisfied with a final council decision is to challenge it by way of a formal appeal".

But MPs reacted angrily this week, sending two letters to the council. One was written by the county's six Liberal Democrat MPs and the other by its seven Tory MPs, including Sir Jeremy Hunt, a former chancellor, and Claire Coutinho, the current shadow energy secretary and former children's minister.

Lincoln Jopp, the Tory MP for Spelthorne, wrote on Facebook: "It is deeply troubling that Cllr Curran has written to all Surrey MPs seeking to restrict the level of engagement Surrey County Council will have with us on SEND matters.

"This decision risks families not getting the real help they need."

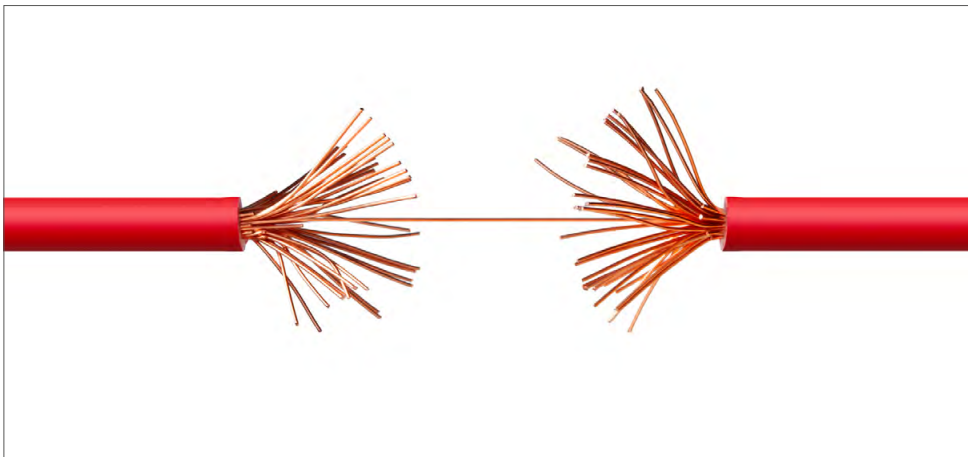
Al Pinkerton, the Liberal Democrat MP for Surrey Heath, said: "Residents rightly expect their MPs to advocate for them – especially vulnerable families navigating complex systems. Blocking that link only hurts those who need help the most.

"We are elected to speak up – and we won't be silenced."

The Lib Dems' letter said that while it was right that parents were directed to the statutory appeals processes, "not everyone is aware of these or has the means to navigate these channels".

Many cases were highlighted to the council "only after they have exhausted all routes or have been unable to receive a reply from you".

"We contact SCC to



'This hurts those who need help the most'

highlight patterns that may be of interest to local government, explain individual circumstances or raising systemic issues that may warrant further scrutiny or improvement.

"The decision to sever communication between our offices and the council in this manner ... ultimately harms the very people we are all here to serve: the residents of Surrey."

The Tory MPs' letter noted that Dame Kate Dethridge, the DfE's regional director, saw MPs' inboxes as a "useful weathervane" on the council's quality of service.

"Given the delays which still exist across the system, from assessments, case-handling and school and transport allocations, we are sure you'd appreciate the continuing level of concern in the community ... and that it is important for members of parliament to be able to raise these concerns," their letter said.

"We are sure you will appreciate that limiting engagement with MPs who advocate for constituents in this way is likely to be concerning to the public."

Coutinho said she spent "around a third of my

constituency surgeries helping parents dealing with SEND and EHCP cases ... on many occasions I have been able to find solutions to these cases by contacting Surrey County Council.

"I know from my time as SEND minister and my time working with parents of SEND children that the EHCP process can be extremely difficult to navigate. It is my role as your MP to hold these bodies to account and represent you when their services are simply not working as they should be."

Curran said in a statement: "We know and appreciate the important role MPs play for their constituents, and value strong relationships with our MPs, both about council services and policies, and their advocacy on behalf of Surrey to national government. We have clear channels of communication between all Surrey MPs and the council.

"The recent communication ... was to remind them that the correct process for families who are dissatisfied with a final council decision is to challenge it by way of a formal appeal. This is the appropriate and most effective route for families, and information on how to do this is always included when families are notified in writing of the council's decision."



Al Pinkerton



Dame Kate Dethridge

Ofsted's revisits on SEND to start again this summer

SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER

@SCHOOLSWEEK

Monitoring inspections for areas deemed to have 'widespread' failures in their SEND provision will restart this term, a senior Ofsted official has said.

An Ofsted review last year paused the inspections, revisits within 18 months to areas found to have systemic issues. But speaking at the education committee on Tuesday, Adam Sproston, a SEND and alternative provision inspector, said they would resume in the summer term.

Ofsted told Schools Week it also planned to publish the outcome of its review "soon". This would help "build a clearer sense of the impact our work has had".

The inspectorate would also "clarify its approach" to revisits so it was "clearer for the sector about what they will entail".

A quarter of councils inspected under the new area SEND inspection framework, introduced in 2023, were found to deliver "positive experiences and outcomes" for children.

A third were found to have 'widespread' failings – the bottom rating – while half were rated as 'inconsistent', the middle rating. Sproston said 64 of 153 councils have had a full SEND inspection since 2023.

Common issues were struggles with recruitment and retention of specialist staff, lack of co-ordination between health and social partners and schools, rising demand for support and long wait times for wider services.

Lucy Harte, the deputy director of multi-agency operations at the Care Quality Commission (CQC), which runs the inspections alongside Ofsted, said the restarted visits would give more information about the "impact of inspection and the impact of [subsequent] interventions" from councils or the government.

Ofsted and the CQC were challenged that wider data showed poor practice in councils was not picked up.

More than nine in ten legal cases in both SEND tribunals and those overseen by the ombudsman go against councils.



But Georgina Downard, a senior solicitor at the Independent Provider of Special Education Advice (IPSEA), said parents did not feel "heard or their voices valued when breaking the law doesn't appear in reports".

Sproston said inspectors did consider such data, but it was used "as a starting point on inspection. We don't check compliance with every legal duty, but are evaluating the experiences and outcomes of children with SEND."

Harte added that inspectors developed "lines of enquiry" from the data. Reports tried to bring to life "more than the data point".

Sharon Chappell, an assistant ombudsman at the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO), repeated calls for her organisation to be given powers to investigate attendance and exclusion practices.

She told MPs: "We often see evidence of things going wrong – part-time timetables, off-rolling, unofficial exclusions, failure to provide what is in an EHCP [education, health and care plans] – but we can't hold schools to account."

The ombudsman can currently investigate cases of councils not complying with their duties relating to EHCPs.

Labour's schools bill does propose new duties that will give local authorities more influence over admissions at academies, which are their

own admission authorities.

A new duty would force schools and councils to co-operate, with local authorities also able to direct academies to admit a child and appeal to the schools adjudicator over academies' admission numbers.

But Downard said extending these powers alone were "not likely to remove to take away exclusionary practices" used by some schools.

Chappell added while they "may help", the plans also did not "address our concerns over a lack of accountability on SEND admissions more generally".

"If an academy needs to be directed to take a child, there is an indication about the culture in that environment," she said, pointing out that parents who wanted to escalate a complaint after a trust's final decision had to go to the secretary of state.



"That's a big leap to make," she said, adding a more "effective" system would be "underpinned by a fair, simple and independent accountability structure".

If a parent said a school had not removed barriers for their child, they had "nowhere to go with that. Make a complaint route that is easy, accessible and independent."

Downard said that unlike the ombudsman, the results of complaints to the DfE were not published, with no recommendations issued.



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CHRISTODOULOU

Founder, No More Marking

How assessment should (and shouldn't) evolve in the age of AI

Artificial intelligence is already threatening robust and fair assessment. Here's how the Francis review can set us up to meet the defining challenge of the next decade

Less than a year since Bridget Phillipson announced a review of England's curriculum and assessment system, developments in generative AI have obliterated some of our basic assumptions about assessment.

I have argued in the past that it is fine for schools to take time to respond to new technology, and that they don't have to change everything in response to passing fads.

But there comes a point where new trends are impossible to ignore. We are beyond that point now.

In the past two years, there have been dramatic increases in the number of students using generative AI to do their work. At university level, the number of students using AI for assessments went up from 53 per cent in 2024 to 88 per cent in 2025. Among 13 to 18-year-olds generative AI use went from 37 per cent in 2023 to 77 per cent in 2024.

Not only that, but you can't spot its use: AI detectors don't work. They miss real plagiarism and accuse human work of being plagiarised.

In the worst-case scenario, which may already be here, we end up with a kabuki dance where students pretend to write essays and teachers

pretend to mark them.

In the best-case scenario, teachers and exam systems use AI in combination with human judgment to speed up providing grades and feedback on work that the students have done themselves.

Here are five things the curriculum and assessment review needs to do to make the best-case scenario more likely.

Review the performance of AI marking systems

There is a plethora of new AI marking systems out there. (Full disclosure, I work for a company which has created one.) Ofqual should carry out a research review into how different types of systems work.

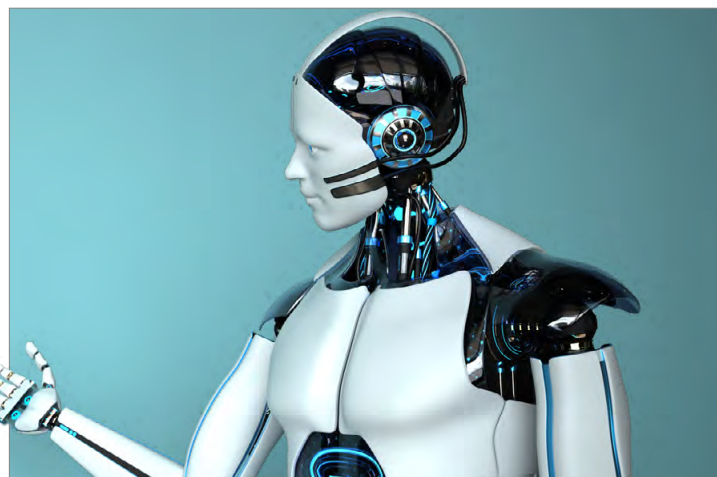
Revise initial teacher training content

The widespread use of AI has exposed a number of misconceptions about assessments.

There is a lot of wishful thinking about how it is fine to use AI for exams or classwork because that is what everyone will be using in the workplace. This is a fundamental category error about the purpose of education and assessment.

What matters in an assessment is not the end product; it is what the end product tells you about the process the student went through to get there.

If a student turns in a perfect piece



“ We are now beyond the point of ignoring AI

of work that has been generated by AI, it is like using a forklift truck to move weights at the gym, or hailing a taxi to take you round the marathon course. Initial teacher training needs new modules on assessment and AI which explain this point clearly.

Eliminate non-examined written assessments

Around the world, everyone is waking up to the fact that unsupervised writing assessments are no longer viable. We need to return to in-person exams.

England's regulated assessment system is mostly based around exams, which makes the review's job easier. However, a wider systemic problem is that independent schools can take unregulated qualifications with significant proportions of non-examined assessment of the type that is ripe for AI plagiarism.

Keep handwritten exams

For years now, we have heard that exams need to go digital. But do they?

There are important cognitive benefits to handwriting, and if students know the final assessment is handwritten it will make them more likely to practise using that

format too, and less likely to use AI. Plus, AI actually makes it easier to process and transcribe handwritten exam scripts.

At No More Marking, our software allows teachers to easily switch between an image of the original handwritten script and an AI transcription.

Investigate post-qualification university admissions

Currently, students apply to university with predicted grades. It would be much fairer if they applied with their actual results, but in the current system that is a fiendish logistical challenge.

If AI marking does work well, we could keep the exam calendar as it is, get quicker results to students, and run a university admissions process using actual grades at the end of the summer term.

In sum, AI can widen inequalities, or it can help us to close them. The Francis review will need to be judicious in ensuring that it sets us on the right course as the technology continues to evolve.

You can read a longer version of this article [here](#).

Opinion

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STUART GARDNER

CEO, Thinking School Academies Trust

How will we know if RISE teams are really helping?

Labour's school improvement drive is well-intentioned, but a crucial piece of the policy puzzle is missing that could undermine its ambition, writes Stuart Gardner

With more than 600 schools identified as "stuck" (those that have had successive Ofsted grades of less than 'good') and the sector still grappling with the lasting impacts of the pandemic, budget constraints and rising student needs, the question of how best to drive improvement is both urgent and complex.

To address this, the Department for Education is investing £20 million in the rollout of RISE teams: experienced education professionals tasked with supporting stuck schools to enhance their provision.

But, while this initiative is well-intentioned and potentially powerful, its success will ultimately hinge on one critical factor: accountability.

With the first wave of RISE teams now operational and the programme expanding, it is vital that open dialogue takes place across the sector. We must share early learnings and challenges, and explore how these teams can have a meaningful, sustainable impact on school improvement.

From my previous experience as a National Leader of Education, engaging with system support in some of our schools and with

schools identified for RISE support, it is becoming clear early on that an important piece of the puzzle is missing. There is no transparent accountability framework for the work of RISE advisers and those they commission to provide support.

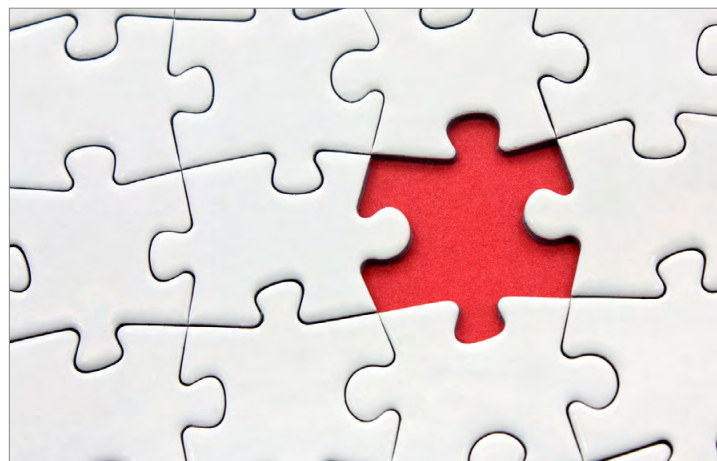
RISE teams are being introduced into an ecosystem where many multi-academy trusts and schools are already driving school improvement with deeply embedded, context-specific approaches, and accountability for school improvement is held by the school and responsible bodies.

If RISE teams are to be a vehicle for school improvement, they must also have accountability for said school improvement. Therefore, it is essential that we create an accountability framework which ensures that tailored support is commissioned to complement the school improvement journey, ensuring that all parties are accountable for the impact of the work they do.

An accountability framework would serve multiple functions:

Clarify accountabilities

How will RISE advisers and the support they commission be held accountable for their impact on school improvement? Within the current proposed school accountability framework, accountability only sits with schools and responsible bodies.



“ There is no accountability framework for their work

Clarify responsibilities

It should clearly outline who is responsible for doing what, whether it is the school, the trust, the RISE adviser or the DfE, so that everyone involved knows their role in achieving improvement.

Define impact metrics

The framework must establish how success will be measured and how progress will be tracked. This will ensure that time and resources are focused on key outcomes and allow for meaningful accountability within the RISE structure.

Ensure quality and alignment

It should provide a structure for quality assurance, make expectations explicit on both sides, and ensure alignment with existing improvement strategies.

Enable feedback and learning

There must be mechanisms for schools, trusts and RISE advisers to provide feedback and learn from one another, allowing the programme to evolve and adapt.

Crucially, such a framework will provide reassurance to the government and taxpayers that

the investment is delivering value for money and driving genuine improvements, holding all parties to account for the impact of the money spent on the RISE programme.

RISE teams, if implemented effectively, could be a valuable addition to the school improvement landscape. They bring additional resources, fresh perspectives and the expertise of experienced practitioners.

However, they cannot operate without being accountable for the impact of their work and must work in tandem with the proven expertise of trust-led school improvement structures, which are grounded in deep local knowledge and long-term commitment.

In theory, the RISE programme has great potential. But in practice, its success will depend on how well it integrates with existing structures and on a clear, shared understanding of accountability.

Without it, we risk undermining rather than enhancing improvement efforts. With it, RISE teams could become a powerful force for good, driving real, measurable and lasting improvement for the children and communities who need it most.

Opinion

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LUCY
WATSON

MFL Teacher and mum to an
adopted sibling group

The hidden funding cut that will soon affect your school

Cuts to support for a group of vulnerable children garnered little attention, writes Lucy Watson, but they will have consequences for the education sector

Did you know that there are no accurate statistics about the number of care-experienced children in our schools? Perhaps that is why the government has found it so easy to cut the funding that is meant to support them. In fact, did you even know that had happened?

According to the Department for Education, in 2024 the number of children who left care through a special guardianship order (SGO) was 3,860 and the number of children who left care through adoption was 2,980.

If we work on the basis that approximately 6,500 children leave the care system every year and multiply this number by 12, it would be fair to assume that there are in excess of 70,000 care-experienced children in our schools. Most have been removed from their birth parents due to abuse, neglect or violence.

According to Adoption UK's 2024 Breaking the Barriers to School Attendance report, as many as half of adopted children and those living under SGOs are struggling to take their seats in the classroom.

They are more likely to have

additional needs, to struggle with school attendance, to be in internal exclusion or on a part-time timetable, and to be suspended or permanently excluded.

Children who have experienced early childhood trauma may find themselves regularly having a fight/flight/freeze trauma response. They may experience sensory overload or be unable to cope with the number of demands put on them in schools. They might struggle making and keeping friends.

Many just simply do not feel safe when they are away from their primary care-giver.

In 2015, in recognition of the additional challenges they face, the Adoption Support Fund was introduced. The ASF entitled children to access up to £5,000 a year in therapeutic support and offered a further £2,500 for specialist assessments.

In 2023, the ASF was expanded to include those leaving care under Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Orders. Under its new name of the adoption and special guardianship support fund (ASGSF), it can be used to cover a wide range of therapeutic support.

Last month, however, the government slashed the fair access limit for the ASGSF to £3,000 and removed the assessment strand completely. The adoption and kinship care community has been left devastated.



“ These cuts will have a catastrophic effect

These cuts will have a catastrophic effect on these vulnerable children. We are calling on the government to reconsider and to take urgent action to reverse the cuts.

In the meantime, the news may have gone unnoticed in education circles, but schools need to be aware that these cuts will affect them. Some 70,000 already-traumatised children are now suffering a significant reduction in support, which will almost certainly affect their behaviour in the classroom and playground.

Care-experienced children attract pupil premium funding of £2,570 per child per year. While this fund is not ring-fenced, in light of these changes, schools should consider carefully how they might use it to best support the care-experienced children in their schools.

Some providers have introduced targeted educational support packages that can be funded with pupil premium payments.

In addition, many schools would benefit from up-to-date trauma training. Our understanding of trauma has changed significantly since I did my teacher training back

in 2005, and many schools are still relying on outdated rewards and sanctions policies to try to force compliance.

Likewise, public rewards often exacerbate problems for children with developmental trauma, as they feel unable to meet expectations, go into toxic shame and may start to sabotage. Indeed, any one-size-fits-all sanctions policies are likely to miss things at best, and at worst exacerbate them.

The message from the adoption and kinship care community is clear: fund now or pay later. Some 39 per cent of care leavers aged 19 to 21 are not in education, employment or training, compared with 13 per cent of their peers. Care leavers make up 25 per cent of the adult homeless population and 25 per cent of the adult prison population.

While many schools may have only a relatively small number of care-experienced children on their roll, if all schools join the campaign to improve outcomes for care-experienced children, then we will be giving some of our most vulnerable children a future.

Opinion

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AMANDA WATKINS

Independent special needs and inclusion consultant

What we can learn from other countries about 'SEND' funding

England is increasingly an outlier in its approach to identifying and meeting learners' needs, explains Amanda Watkins

After 27 years supporting over 30 European countries' education ministries with their policies for inclusive education, I know one thing for sure: financing is a tough nut that no nation has yet totally cracked. Among them, however, England is struggling even to find its nutcracker.

The government's pledge to "investigate the reasons for increasing demand for SEND support and provide a 'costed' plan" for reform is a tacit acknowledgment that, here as elsewhere, "SEND" funding is a critical systemic challenge.

Like England, many countries are still grappling with the reasons for the exponential rise in the number of learners being identified as requiring additional support, let alone the detailed information they need about the impact of various models on meeting those needs.

Among those making the most progress in tackling this issue, a common thread is that they recognise that labelling learners as having "SEND" has little to do with their learning needs and a lot to do with prevailing policy (thus my use of speech marks).

The differences between countries (and within them) in terms of who is

identified as "SEND" are huge. Some formally identify less than 0.5 per cent of school-aged learners; many others over 5 per cent.

These numbers do not reflect the actual incidence of specific learning needs and/or disabilities, nor how much money is being spent on ensuring learners receive the support they need.

What these numbers do seem to reflect are population densities and, more importantly, local funding mechanisms and the strategic behaviours that emerge from them. Indeed, the same pattern eventually emerges across most countries: where there is a system of needs-based funding, more needs are identified.

This is the point at which the conversation tends to get heated or break down altogether. But rethinking the needs-based funding approach does not have to mean identifying learners' needs less effectively. More importantly, it does not have to mean providing less or poorer support.

Instead, moving away from labelling some learners as "having SEND" towards funding a more inclusive system overall can allow school communities – including families – to access resources without outsourcing the responsibility for saying who is "worthy" of extra cash.

This would require a radical rethink of the English system, to focus funding decisions away from



“ There will need to be some introspection at the DfE

individual learners and towards ensuring all policies incentivise capacity building.

Helpfully, European-level work with policymakers lights the way. We know, for example, that funding mechanisms which promote capacity-building for inclusive education in all schools need to work towards three main goals:

Raising achievement

All resourcing and support systems need to promote capacity-building strategies at all system levels. These include local-level, community-based capacity-building initiatives, school-level work, and rethinking how specific and targeted resources for specialist support is made available.

Sharing practice

All forms of specialist and alternative provision settings need support to effectively act as a resource for other local (mainstream) schools.

This should be incentivised, and disseminating inclusive practice should be embedded within all pre- and in-service training for specialist professionals.

Improving training

Capacity building to meet more learners' needs in more flexible ways needs to feature in all professional

development opportunities, including teacher training and education and leadership development. Where possible, these opportunities should be open to parents too.

When mainstream settings are felt to be inadequate for meeting learners' needs, it is quite natural for parents, professionals and learners to feel that specialist provision offers better prospects.

Funding policies can drive this sort of segregation, or they can incentivise inclusion. To do the latter, they must be guided in equal measure by the principles of efficiency, effectiveness and equity (not just equality).

The current system is quite obviously not achieving these principles. Instead, it has resulted in a costly, inefficient bureaucracy, accompanied by a cottage industry thriving on its in-built combativeness.

If the DfE is genuinely to "understand the reasons for increasing and changed demand for SEND support", then there will need to be some introspection as well as discussions with stakeholders.

A key question they will need to honestly answer is how the system incentives it has put in place have resulted in the unsustainable situation in which they find themselves.

SEND Solutions

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MATT
HOOD

Co-founder, Oak National
Academy and Ambition
Institute

How to build a new system on inclusive foundations

We need to redraw the incentives that drive SEND provision, starting upstream of diagnosis and right down to how provision is commissioned, writes Matt Hood

Last week, I argued that our current SEND system is held back by a poorly designed funding model that drives dysfunction. Until we address that, progress is blocked. Once addressed, we have the opportunity to build something better.

Here is a blueprint for what should come next: six moves that, together, would deliver a fairer, more effective system for pupils with additional needs.

Reclaiming childhood

Too many additional needs are downstream of what childhood has become: over-stimulated, under-supervised online and over-supervised in the real world. Putting this right is not just important for its own sake but a practical way to reduce the volume and severity of need that schools face.

Jonathan Haidt is right: social media is doing real harm, and there is no serious evidence that it is safe for children. Ndidi Okezie is right too: we need a major expansion of passion and character-building youth activities.

Support for children must be matched by support for parents,

including the return of SureStart and a national roll-out of the evidence-backed Triple P parenting programme.

An inclusive philosophy

Tom Rees and Ben Newmark make a powerful case for a philosophy of inclusion which recognises every person with additional needs as a complete human being, not a problem to be fixed.

Breaking from the medicalised, deficit-driven funding model gives us the chance to break from the deficit mindset too – to stop defining pupils by what they lack and instead embrace a broader vision of success: one that includes joy, contribution, connection and dignity alongside academic merit.

This is not about lowering expectations. It is about raising them in the right direction.

Muscular regulation of diagnostics

I have yet to meet a headteacher who does not think our diagnostic system is a wild west. Definitions have broadened, screening tools are misused, and private providers are everywhere. This is leading to over-diagnosis and poor resource allocation.

This is not just a policy problem, it is a political one too. It is just the right amount of “truthy” for opportunists to make it a wedge issue. We must be honest about the problem and introduce tighter, more muscular



“ We need to stop defining pupils by what they lack

regulation if we are going to stop that from happening.

More expert teaching

In a paper being published next week, Jen Barker, Peps Mccrea and Josh Goodrich argue persuasively that, in order to improve provision for children with SEND, we must move away from some of the medicalised intervention models that EHCPs encourage.

Instead, we should focus on pupils' cognitive similarity, evidence-based, high-impact core instruction that benefits everyone, designing accessible lessons by default, minimal, appropriate adaptations and empowering effective teacher assessment.

This shift demands serious investment in teacher development. As Loic Menzies argues in his paper, A System that Empowers, we should use the next stage of national professional development reform to build exactly this kind of capability.

Targeted mainstream provision

When it comes to supporting pupils in mainstream schools with more complex needs, school leaders are taking matters into their own hands.

Faced with a lack of alternative provision locally, they are setting up their own internal targeted provision, with (almost) the

same curriculum, and porous boundaries allowing some pupils to move between the targeted and mainstream provision depending on their needs at any given time.

At Lee Waring's school, for example, outcomes are improving, pupils are happier, and suspensions and exclusions have drastically reduced. We need more of this, grounded in evidence, evaluated as we roll it out to more schools.

Greater commissioning clout

When the state has become reliant on private equity companies for provision – whether it is residential children's homes, alternative provision or special schools – something has gone very wrong.

We need bigger, smarter commissioning like that argued for in the McAlister review, most likely through mayors and combined authorities, to push down costs, push up quality and build out public provision.

Single local authorities are outgunned. Acting together, they have a better fighting chance.

Reclaim childhood. Redefine inclusion. Regulate diagnostics. Rethink classrooms. Rebuild specialist provision. Reinforce the public sector.

Six moves if we are ready to lead the system, not just patch it.

THE CONVERSATION

LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM



Jess Mahdavi-Gladwell

Deputy Head and
SENCO, Fairford
Academy Barnhurst,
Illuminate
Minds Trust

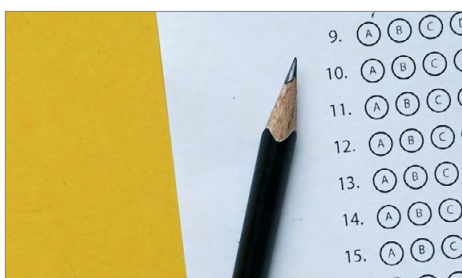
NO PRESSURE?

As May half-term approaches at speed, the last few days have seen a variety of letters shared on social media: letters written by headteachers to Y6 children who, by the time you read this, will have completed their SATS.

These letters differ in content but there are key themes. The underpinning message which permeates them all is that children are more – more than their SATS results, more than can be measured by assessments, more than a pupil. They are valued family members with a wide range of skills and strengths who contribute to many relationships.

This DfE blog points out that pupils “... shouldn’t be made to feel any unnecessary pressure when it comes to the KS2 assessments...” before going on to explain the scores, saying that children who score below 100 may need additional help to reach the expected standard.

Though there is an explanation that headteachers can decide not to enter



children and that it may be appropriate for some children to be assessed in a different way, this explanation of results felt starkly binary.

NO LABELS?

The Difference’s blog this week covers an interview with a headteacher discussing the role of young carer.

I love the assertion that being assigned a label or identity should not be seen as a deficit, but that it is right to acknowledge the contribution which children who fill this role make to their families and communities.

I know that many of us already seek to support these children and to celebrate as well as support them as they contribute practically and emotionally.

NO SWEAT?



The sun has been shining in earnest, and that means there have been more hats in school, on children’s heads – and in lost property!

This blog asks us to think about the hats we wear in addition to, or sequentially with, our teacher role. For example, the author prompts us to think about times when a parent-teacher might need to wear their teacher hat over their parent hat.

In combination with The Difference’s blog above, this led me to think about our children and the hats they might find difficult to metaphorically remove during the school day. For young carers specifically, are we alert to unusual levels of distraction and ready to reflect on what might be causing that, rather than assuming a lack of effort?

Another takeaway for me is to adapt the author’s suggestion of using Post-it notes to map movement. I will be using that strategy

to consider how equitably I visit different year groups in the schools I am working in over the coming weeks.

NO PRAYER?

Cuppa with a Change Maker regularly discusses social justice and equity, principles by which I am driven. After reading about Sean Harris’ couch in this blog, I expected to connect most with the part about rearranging furniture (this could be described as one of my areas for development).

Instead, I kept returning to the question, which change-maker would I like to have a cuppa with? I definitely approved of the choice of Yorkshire Tea (though I typically have my tea black with rose water) and identified with Craig Parkinson’s love of learning and discomfort with the feeling that I have plateaued.

Despite these points of connection, I held onto a sense that all of us could benefit from an aspiration to have a cuppa and a chat with someone who inspires us personally. I have been very lucky to meet many people who have inspired me, within and outside our profession, and there are people who would have been top of this list that I have been lucky (or cheeky) enough to meet.

I think that, this week, Pope Leo XIV might be my person of choice. I would love to hear about his aspirations for children and for education. I am doing some days of consultancy with Xavier Catholic Education Trust this term, so if His Holiness is reading...



Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts



The Knowledge

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



What leaders really want from NPQs (and the review isn't asking)

Shane Leaning, Founder, Education Leaders

Schools minister Catherine McKinnell urged the sector to "get involved" in the Department for Education's review of the national professional qualification (NPQ) framework. But there is a massive problem the review is not addressing: our current NPQ programmes are simply not transforming leadership practice in schools.

I have interviewed a good number of NPQ graduates recently, and the feedback I repeatedly hear is: "I enjoyed the course but it didn't change me."

This should alarm us all. We cannot afford leadership programmes that deliver information without transformation.

A fundamental flaw

The current NPQ frameworks, particularly those under review (headship, senior leadership, and executive leadership), fundamentally misunderstand how leadership actually develops. They are overwhelmingly focused on what successful leaders know and do, not how they develop the capacity to lead.

Leadership is presented as a set of competencies to be acquired through study rather than a practice to be developed through experience. The approach reflects a belief that knowledge acquisition equals leadership improvement. Experience suggests otherwise.

I recently conducted interviews with school leaders. Ninety per cent reported that programmes were "overwhelmingly theoretical, limiting transfer to practice" and that they "provided good background but lacked practicality".

As the government scales back NPQ funding dramatically, we must ensure that remaining resources deliver impact.

How leadership develops

School leaders do not develop through courses alone. It takes years of deliberate practice, reflection and learning from failures and victories.

This happens in the daily reality of school life: addressing underperformance in valued colleagues, making difficult budget decisions, dealing with competing stakeholder relationships.

Current NPQ frameworks barely acknowledge this messy reality. They are built on the flawed assumption that knowing what good leadership looks like equals becoming a good leader.



What's missing

As Gareth Conyard and Sir Steve Lancashire argued [in these pages this week](#), the place to start this kind of review is to listen to teachers and leaders.

If the DfE did, what they would hear first and foremost is that school leaders need practical tools they can implement immediately, not more theory.

Here are three examples of crucial elements mostly missing from NPQs:

Handling Difficult Conversations

Leadership improvement often stalls because leaders avoid necessary conversations. They lack confidence in handling emotional responses, potential relationship damage, or not saying the wrong things. Yet promptly addressing issues is essential for school improvement.

The most impactful leadership programmes, according to my research, involve "immersive, high-pressure scenarios" with immediate feedback, developing skills like de-escalation and time management.

Effective delegation

With schools facing chronic recruitment challenges and leadership vacancies at critical levels, proper delegation has never been more important. Yet it is a persistent challenge, particularly for those promoted from teaching roles.

NPQs might cover delegation theory but do not build the practical skills: matching tasks to capabilities, communicating expectations, establishing appropriate check-in points. The result is leaders who understand delegation conceptually but struggle to implement it effectively.

Facilitating meetings

Schools run on meetings, yet a staggering amount of school time is wasted in ineffective meetings, directly impacting teacher workload and wellbeing.

Moving forward

My research suggests three essential reforms the DfE's expert panel must consider:

Practical application

Sixty-four per cent of leaders I spoke with valued programmes where learning is "embedded in daily practice" and "aligned with ongoing projects". NPQs should require participants to implement learning in their schools with more structured feedback cycles. (Essays are not enough.)

Communities of practice

Eighty-two per cent of leaders identified ongoing cohort connections as the most valuable aspect of development. NPQs need to create structured peer networks which extend beyond programme completion, rather than treating participants as individual learners. (Forums are not enough.)

Contextualisation

The "golden thread" approach assumes standardised content across all contexts. The conversations I have had contradict this, showing leaders instead value programmes that allow "extraction of most relevant/needed course elements" for their specific settings.

If the NPQ review merely tweaks content without addressing these fundamentals, it will be a wasted opportunity to tackle high and rising leadership vacancies and record departures from the profession.

My research suggests that a leadership development framework based on what leaders want and how they actually develop would look dramatically different. But are we bold enough to listen?



Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

FRIDAY

A fantastic parliamentary answer today that gives an insight into the minutiae of policy reform.

Labour's schools bill proposes schools can only have three branded items of uniform. A branded tie is allowed on top of this for secondaries.

Former Conservative schools minister (and let's not forget ex-education secretary!) Damian Hinds had to ask whether branded lanyard ribbons counted.

Schools minister Catherine McKinnell said the proposed legislation defines uniform "as a bag and any clothing required for school or for any lesson, club, activity or event facilitated by the school".

"Therefore, as it is not clothing or a bag, a branded lanyard ribbon would not count towards the limit on the number of branded school uniform items."

All clear then.

WEDNESDAY

Another week, another story about Bridget Phillipson being shuffled out as education secretary.

The Guardian reported that "some in Labour circles" believe science secretary Peter Kyle has become so close to the big tech industry that "he is supposed to monitor", he faces a move in the next reshuffle, possibly replacing" Phillipson in education.

Here's your chance to take on the

unenviable task of making the new system of regional school improvement advisers make sense and work smoothly...

The DfE has released its advert to replace John Edwards as director general of the regions group.

It's a nice earner: £160,000 a year with another annual £40,000 for your pension pot. Happy days.

The government is looking for an "accomplished leader with a strong track record of driving school improvement across the system, excellent operational delivery experience, and significant regional or local delivery leadership".

He or she will need "exceptional skills in engaging and influencing at senior levels, both within and outside government, and an outstanding record of people leadership".

THURSDAY

Ofsted today released its latest Big Listen action monitoring plan – where it updates the progress it's made in reforming itself. Showing just how much change is needed at Ofsted Towers, there are *132* actions to be completed.

The update for April shows 57 have been ticked off – three more than March. Just another 75 to go!

Finally, a scheme that Labour *isn't* cutting! It's been confirmed the period product scheme will continue for the 2025 to 2026 academic year.

The keynote speech for today's Schools and Academies Show wasn't confirmed until the last minute. Early years minister Stephen Morgan got the gig – but appeared via video link.

This led academy trust chief (until very recently) Sir Andrew Carter to wonder why. Perhaps ministers "don't want interaction" with sector staff demanding more investment in schools, he told a panel event.

Elsewhere at the show we heard a woeful story about one school's attempts to go green.

Will Mumford, from the government's property firm LocatED, told the tale of a school where the air source heat pump "has never worked. It was done by a contractor that sadly failed and we're trying to unpick it all.

"The heat pump has a big sticker on the side saying: 'For use in Italy only'. The manufacturer's quite rightly turned around and said 'it's not our problem' and we've got to find another heat pump that can work with that system, that design."

PS: We heard the pre-event party for stakeholders at the show was held ON A YACHT. Who said there wasn't any cash in the schools sector?!



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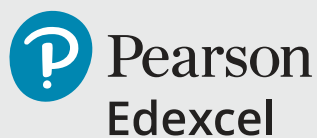
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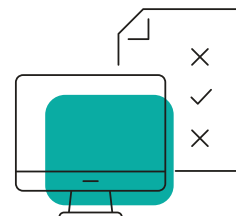


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