

'Pay and funding uncertainty will be cloud over conference'



P6

## DFE PLANS INCLUSION BASE PEER NETWORKS



Page 9

## IS DFE HANDING MANDARINS A 'MONOPOLY ON WISDOM'?



Page 11

## HOW TRAINING CAN EMBED INCLUSION IN YOUR CULTURE



Page 23

## CAN SCHOOL STAFF COPE WITH SEND REFORMS?



Page 28

# 'I get my buzz from education'



Profile | Pages 19-20

# DFE'S SECRET PLAN TO CUT SPECIAL SCHOOL EXPANSION

- Best council deficit plans will prioritise mainstream provision
- Town halls will get top rating for avoiding expanding special
- Threats to revoke underperforming councils' SEND powers

SAMANTHA BOOTH | [SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK)

EXCLUSIVE | Page 4

# SCHOOLS WEEK

## Meet the news team



**Freddie Whittaker**  
EDITOR

@FCDWHITTAKER  
FREDDIE@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



**Samantha Booth**  
DEPUTY EDITOR

@SAMANTHAJBOOTH  
SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



**Nicky Phillips**  
HEAD DESIGNER

@GELVETICA  
NICKY.PHILLIPS@FEWEEK.CO.UK



**Lydia Chantler-Hicks**  
SENIOR REPORTER

@LYDIACHSW  
LYDIA@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



**Jack Dyson**  
SENIOR REPORTER

@JACKYDYS  
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



**Ruth Lucas**  
REPORTER

@RUTHLUCAS\_  
RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



**Shane Mann**  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

@SHANERMANN  
SHANE.MANN@EDUCATIONSCAPE.COM

### Got a story?

If you have a tip-off for the news team, or if your school is doing something new and interesting that you think warrants a visit from a journalist, please email [news@schoolsweek.co.uk](mailto:news@schoolsweek.co.uk).

THE TEAM

Managing Director: Scott Forbes | Senior Designer: Simon Kay | Relationship Manager: Clare Halliday |  
Operations and Finance Director: Victoria Boyle | Event Manager: Frances Ogefere Dell | Senior Administrator: Evie Hayes |  
Finance Assistant and PA to CEO: Zoe Tuffin | Office Administrator: Zoe Belcher | Sales Administrator: Tyler Palmer



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This week councils received word from ministers on what exactly they need to do to create their local SEND plans.

These important documents reveal that officials will judge the best council proposals as those with “little to no plans” to expand special schools or alternative provision.

Where expansion is planned, councils must provide a “compelling rationale” as to why need cannot be met in specialist bases.

Schools, mainstream and special, are integral to the success of the government’s plans.

Any plans setting out in black and white what the future holds for them should be communicated transparently.

Ministers also need to be careful councils are not unintentionally disincentivised to create specialist places where they are really needed.

Many special schools are already over capacity, and it is yet to be seen what impact the reform announcement will have on requests for places.

The documents also reveal beefed up oversight from the Department for Education of a council’s actions.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson had been alluding to this recently. She told MPs last month: “I will not tolerate failure.”

By placing “heightened scrutiny” on councils and threatening to revoke SEND services, it shows the government is serious about avoiding the failures of the last reforms.

They are clearly keen to keep a very close eye on council actions. This is right, considering the close scrutiny schools come under each year. Parity is essential.

But, with just four months to create these in-depth plans – which require information that has not yet been published – ministers need to be sure that these strategies are not undeliverable.

This cannot just be a hoop-jumping exercise set up to justify the writing off of soaring deficits. This needs to be lasting, impactful change with no unintended consequences.

## Most read online this week:

- 1 Academy trust to make big cuts after falling £500k into the red**
- 2 New Ofsted policy sees 1 in 12 inspections deferred or paused**
- 3 ‘There is nothing left to cut’: The schools counting the cost of inclusion**
- 4 Beer raises a glass to 11 years at DfE**
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# Councils will be praised for snubbing special places

EXCLUSIVE

SAMANTHA BOOTH

SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Councils will be given top marks by the government if their SEND reform proposals include “little to no” plans to increase special school or alternative provision capacity, it has emerged.

Documents seen by Schools Week also reveal the Department for Education’s threat to revoke council SEND powers if they “persistently fail”, including unprecedented action of transferring responsibilities to a trust.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson will sign off on councils’ “local SEND reform plans”, which they must submit in exchange for the government writing off 90 per cent of their historic SEND deficits.

These plans will help to drive forward the DfE’s SEND reforms to make mainstream schools more inclusive.

Documents sent to councils this week reveal the government will use a “quality assessment” framework to judge the plans, with four ratings from “requirements not met” to “exceeds requirements”.

The best areas have to go beyond “minimum expectations” with a “comprehensive, well-articulated” response that “demonstrates a strong understanding and effective development of the reform strategy”.

To achieve top marks on their high needs capital strategy, the council must show “strong evidence” that it has a clear plan for an inclusive mainstream system, such as an increased capacity in mainstream and improving the building’s “suitability”.

But it should also include “little to no plans to increase special school or AP capacity”.

Any minimal plans proposing specialist expansion would need to have a “compelling rationale as to why need cannot be met in specialist bases”, the documents say.

## Profound and multiple learning disabilities

Acceptable reasons include insufficient places for pupils with need types that are “less

**Exceeds Requirements**  
The response goes beyond the minimum expectations. It is comprehensive, well-articulated, and demonstrates a strong understanding and effective development of the reform strategy. May include innovative or exemplary elements.

High needs capital strategy shows strong evidence that the LA has a clear plan for an inclusive mainstream system for the full 0-25 age range. Vision clearly aligned to SEND reform principles across all areas of activity. Specifically:

- Strategy includes **strong evidence that there are plans to increase capacity in mainstream**; the LA is harnessing all available opportunities for inclusion bases.
- Strategy includes **little to no plans to increase special school or AP capacity**; any minimal plans are accompanied by a compelling rationale as to why need cannot be met in specialist bases
- Strategy shows **strong evidence of plans to improve the suitability of the mainstream estate**, linking to the accessibility strategy.

Where the LA has alternative funding for a special/AP free school, the strategy sets out how this funding will support overall objectives, with strong attention to engaging strong local trusts when delivering places.

## ‘Councils are being told to write plans for the here and now, that ignore reality’

frequently met in inclusion bases”.

Examples include profound and multiple learning disabilities and some “acute cognition and learning needs or medical needs”.

Other reasons include there not being enough places for pupils with “complex needs”, despite the council “having embraced opportunities to meet need in specialist bases”.

But alternative funding provided to some councils which decided to cancel their special or AP free school project has “more flexible grant conditions and can be used to create special school places”.

Councils will still be considered to “meet” requirements – the second highest rating – if they plan to increase special or AP capacity with a “compelling rationale”.

Town halls with no such rationale for why the need cannot be met in a specialist base in mainstream would get a “working towards requirements” judgment.

Warren Carratt, chief executive at Nexus MAT, said it “was nothing short of appalling”

and feared it would push councils to “not plan for more special school places and therefore pre-empting the outcome of what should be individual, child-focused needs assessments”.

“The proposed reforms are intended to transform our system and are currently being consulted on, with meaningful change not coming for at least three years.

“At the same time, councils are being told to write plans for the here and now, that ignore reality and assume that promised land has already been delivered, when it’s supposed to be something that government are consulting on, to get it right.”

One council official told Schools Week that the government “should be talking about having the correct level of specialist provision – inclusion bases and special schools, to meet needs and reduce the reliance on independent provision and education other than at school”.

Special schools are under immense pressure, with approximately 8,000 more secondary pupils on roll than reported capacity in 2023-24,

Continued on next page

## NEWS: INCLUSION

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according to DfE data.

Projections published last month suggest the DfE expects the proportion of pupils in state-funded special schools to rise from 1.9 per cent to 2.1 per cent by 2032-33, before dropping down to 1.9 per cent again by 2034-35.

This compares to a rise of pupils in specialist bases from 0.3 per cent to 0.8 per cent over the same timescale.

In the white paper, the DfE said its reforms represent a “fundamental reset to the specialist sector”. But all pupils who have a special school place by September 2029 will be able to stay there until the end of their education.

The DfE told *Schools Week* the law requires councils to ensure there are sufficient places for pupils in their area, including those with SEND.

The government’s expectations across local services are now “unequivocal”, and they want every area to “rise to the challenge”, with support from government officials.

Where there is strong evidence that local need cannot be met in mainstream, capital can still be invested in specialist places for pupils with “the most complex needs - ensuring that no LA will be forced into a position where they cannot meet their sufficiency duties”.

A spokesperson said special schools will “always have a vital role for children with the most complex needs, but we know that most children thrive when supported closer to home alongside their peers, and that earlier, group-based intervention in mainstream settings can prevent needs escalating”.

### Intervention threat

In a letter co-signed by Phillipson and health secretary Wes Streeting, councils were told they have seen “wide variation in local outcomes that cannot be explained by systemic changes alone”.

The government’s expectations across local services are now “unequivocal”, and they want every area to “rise to the challenge”, with support from government officials.

But for areas with the “most acute performance concerns”, officials will be placing “heightened scrutiny on the extent to which you are doing everything within your control to implement the reforms effectively”.

This includes “a close examination of leadership capability, the pace and grip with which you act, and clear accountability through a named senior responsible officer”.

The government will also use returned plans to assess ongoing performance and delivery, to best



Bridget Phillipson

## ‘We will not hesitate to use the full range of intervention powers’

allocate support and challenge.

The department will “act decisively” where progress “does not materialise”.

But, when “failure is persistent, we will not hesitate to use the full range of intervention powers including removing the licence to deliver SEND services”.

The DfE told *Schools Week* that as a last resort it could use statutory powers “up to and including transferring SEND responsibilities to a trust”.

This has never happened before. It has been used to remove children’s social care services from failing councils.

Councils have until June 19 to submit a plan. If a council does not meet the threshold for approval it will be required to revise and improve the plan by November.

They have been asked to provide a three-year “high-level roadmap”, as well as focused delivery plan for 2026-27.

Once agreed, the DfE will issue a grant covering 90 per cent of high needs-related dedicated school grants deficits accrued up to the end of March.

Alongside the quality assessment framework, the plans will be checked through a series of “tiers”.

This includes a SEND delivery board chaired by Tim Coulson, director-general of the DfE’s regions group, which will make recommendations to Phillipson. Kevan Collins, Phillipson’s SEND delivery adviser, will also sit on the board.

Areas will be required to provide quarterly data returns. The DfE will give them “visualised

analysis and benchmarking” to support “local delivery, monitoring and evaluation”.

DfE officials and health regional SEND leads will use this data, discussions at quarterly meetings, the reform plan and Ofsted reports to “assess performance and delivery at the local level”.

### Experts at hand ‘group model’

Future deficit support before the government takes on the cost pressures of SEND in 2028 will take into account a council’s successful delivery of their approved plan.

This will include “appropriate use” of investment to establish the “experts at hand” service, a core part of the reforms aiming to boost the availability of external support for schools.

However, the DfE is yet to publish key information about its reforms.

Council officials have also warned of a tight timescale. The government’s consultation on the SEND reforms will only close in May.

“We don’t want to commit to a plan we can’t deliver, but to get the financial relief we have to submit a plan that meets their requirements,” one said.

“Ideally we can submit a plan that meets their requirements and which we are confident in, but I’d say that’s a difficult sweet spot to find.”

In the documents, the government does state that the plans will be “within the current statutory framework”, so areas “will not be required to implement any policy that is being consulted on or that will require legislative change”.

# Pay and funding uncertainty 'a cloud over conference'

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

LYDIA@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Uncertainty about the affordability of future pay rises will cast "a cloud" as school leaders gather for ASCL's annual conference, its general secretary Pepe Di'Iasio has said.

The Department for Education (DfE) last week predicted that schools will have around £1 billion of "headroom" over the next two years, meaning they could afford staff pay rises of 2.7 per cent over two years.

It said schools must "realise and sustain better value" in budgets to create further headroom and make a 6.5 per cent rise over three years manageable.

But speaking to *Schools Week* ahead of the annual two-day conference, Di'Iasio described the idea of headroom as "nonsensical".

"There will be some schools who have more than the 2.7 per cent headroom, and the vast majority who haven't," the former school leader said.

Dozens of ASCL members have told him they "can't manage" such a rise, he added.

"That will be something that is worrying school leaders right now," as they await the report of the school teachers' review body.

"I think that will be what is at the front of everyone's minds. It'll be a cloud over the conference."

The pay decision will also impact schools' capacity to deliver the government's white paper reforms, Di'Iasio added.

The National Education Union is carrying out an indicative ballot to gauge if members would be prepared to strike over the proposal for an unfunded 6.5 per cent rise.

ASCL is not yet considering a similar ballot. "I would prefer to consider [that] once we know what the parameters are," Di'Iasio said.

"At the moment it's a cloud, but we don't know whether it's going to be a raincloud, or if some sunshine might break through."

## On the white paper

Di'Iasio feels the white paper has "landed really well", and members broadly view the planned reforms as "sensible". But they now need clarity on implementation.

"Our members are saying, 'so how are we going to realise that plan? What does it mean for me?'"

ASCL is working with the DfE and members to clarify timeframes, and how to prioritise reforms.



Pepe Di'Iasio

Di'Iasio said most pushback had come around ministers' expectations for all schools to join or form trusts. But members have a spectrum of views.

Some trust leaders feel it does not go far enough, while some running standalone academies or council maintained schools feel it is the wrong move.

"That probably means that they have got it just about right," Di'Iasio said of the proposed reforms.

DfE experts involved in writing the white paper will hold surgeries at the conference to answer leaders' questions. Di'Iasio welcomed the approach, saying the past six months have shown the department's "real determination ... to listen."

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson will make a keynote speech this morning and Di'Iasio will interview her, "reflecting on the last 18 months and looking forward to the next 18."

## Ofsted concerns

Ofsted chief inspector Sir Martyn Oliver will also address leaders.

Di'Iasio said members were generally "pleased" with how new Ofsted inspections have been carried out since they were launched in December – broadly finding them more collaborative, while bringing more pressure.

But leaders say the timeframe of inspections is "incredibly challenging", Di'Iasio said. "It puts incredible pressure on school leaders, particularly on SENCos and those leading inclusion."

He also highlighted "fears around [inspections] being too data-driven and too predetermined on some key points of data."

*Schools Week* has reported on concerns around

how schools are compared against national averages for both 'achievement' and 'attendance and behaviour' under the new framework.

Leaders have also raised serious concerns about the merging of "attendance and behaviour" into one judgment area. Oliver recently said the decision "bothered" him and he was "watching" the issue.

## 'Be kind to one another'

As Di'Iasio takes to the stage to open the ASCL's conference at the ACC in Liverpool this morning, he will walk on to Olivia's Dean's hit 'Nice to Each Other'.

His key message will be on "the idea of kindness", and will be directed to everyone, including parents, the workforce, politicians and sister trade unions.

It comes as an ASCL survey, released today reveals the negative impact of parent behaviour on school leader wellbeing.

Of more than 1,700 members surveyed, 90 per cent had experienced rude or disrespectful behaviour, and 60 per cent verbal abuse or threats, while 57 per cent had experienced hostile or defamatory comments on social media.

"The theme of the white paper is about everyone coming together to do their very best for all young people," Di'Iasio said. "I want us to remember in doing that that we need to be kind to one another."

"We may not be able to do everything that we want to do – or that perhaps one sector wants us to do – straight away. But at the heart of what we're trying to do is a professionalism and a genuine sense of kinship."

# Oliver's comments 'need attention'

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

LYDIA@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Ofsted's chief inspector believes the fact that it issues more 'needs attention' grades than 'requires improvement' is evidence that the watchdog is raising standards, prompting criticism for comparing the new and old frameworks.

When Martyn Oliver addresses the annual conference of leaders' union ASCL in Liverpool this morning, he will criticise "the quiet curse of low expectations" and lay out how Ofsted's new framework is setting a "more exacting" standard for education.

"We are coming from a place where more than 90 per cent of schools were previously judged good or outstanding at their most recent inspection," he will say.

"But our job is to point out where expectations can and should be raised. The new report cards do this.

"Take the 'needs attention' grade. We are seeing more schools receive this grade than the old 'requires improvement' because we are raising standards. We are being more exacting. I make no apologies for that."

But his comments about the system – put in place in response to the death of headteacher Ruth Perry – have drawn criticism.

"Given the tragic circumstances that created the catalyst for the changes to inspection, it is quite remarkable that Ofsted has seen fit to ratchet up the pressure on schools and school leaders," Paul Whiteman, general secretary of school leaders' union NAHT, said.

He added that it was "deeply disappointing to see confirmation that Ofsted has designed a framework that will see a higher proportion of schools receive a 'needs attention' grade than the old 'requires improvement' grade."

He also criticised Ofsted for publicly linking the two.

The watchdog has repeatedly stressed that the new and old grading systems should not be compared. Speaking at the Confederation of School Trusts conference in October, Oliver said it was "really important that we really stop people from doing that".

He added: "You can't map 'exceptional' to 'outstanding'. You can't map 'strong' to 'good'. You can't map 'expected standard' to 'requires improvement'."



## How have grades changed?

Overall effectiveness judgments were scrapped by Ofsted in September 2024.

At that time, 91 per cent of all schools had been judged 'good' or 'outstanding' at their most recent inspection. Eight per cent were rated 'requires improvement', and 2 per cent 'inadequate'.

New data shows that just 17 per cent of grades awarded since Ofsted's new framework was introduced have been in the two highest brackets.

Report cards for 246 school inspections had been published, as of February 28, with 1,684 total grades across the eight judgment areas.

Of those, 250 (15 per cent) were 'strong standard' and just 36 (2 per cent) 'exceptional'.

Meanwhile 925 (55 per cent) were 'expected standard', while 179 (11 per cent) were 'needs attention' and 0.9 per cent (15) 'urgent improvement'.

## 'More exacting standards'

Union leaders have also hit back at Oliver after he appeared to suggest critics of the new framework want to "lower the bar" on expectations for schools.

Leaders have repeatedly criticised the way Ofsted is comparing schools against national achievement and attendance averages, saying it could penalise schools with higher levels of poverty and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Speaking at the conference, Oliver will stress that thousands of schools in challenging contexts are "bucking the odds ... to give children a life-changing education".

Where disadvantaged and vulnerable children "are not making the strides that they should", Ofsted "can never downplay the disappointing

outcomes".

"We will never acquiesce to the quiet curse of low expectations that would see Ofsted prioritise context over outcomes for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children."

He will acknowledge that "it is harder for schools working in challenging communities", adding that starting points and "great work" must be considered.

But he will accuse critics of wanting Ofsted "to lower the bar", saying this "stems from a deep empathy with the professionals working in the most challenging contexts".

## 'No leader has low expectations'

Union leaders roundly rejected the suggestion leaders have "low expectations" for children.

"We have seen the rhetoric of low expectations repeated time and time again, and yet we are not clear where these are supposed to originate from," Whiteman said.

ASCL general secretary Pepe Di'Iasio added: "No school leader has low expectations of their pupils."

He stressed that children in disadvantaged communities "often face extremely difficult circumstances in their lives" which can affect school outcomes.

"Ofsted does need to recognise this reality, otherwise its inspection regime effectively penalises these schools," he said.

In his speech, Oliver will commit to ensuring that report cards "recognise where schools deliver against the odds. I will ensure context is seen as a core part of the assessment."

Ofsted has shared extracts from Oliver's speech, which is due to take place at 10.30am, but not its full contents.



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# Peer networks provide support for new inclusion bases

EXCLUSIVE

RUTH LUCAS

RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

New national inclusion base peer networks are being launched to help schools share expertise in setting up provision for pupils with SEND.

The Department for Education (DfE) launched the first of its planned peer networks in the autumn, led by London-based Allen Edwards Primary and Acland Burghley Schools, as part of its regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE) service.

School standards minister Georgia Gould said the networks would “support frontline practitioners so that children benefit from high quality and consistent provision”.

It comes after the schools white paper said all mainstream secondary schools should develop an inclusion base. These could be either a school-commissioned “support” base, or a council-commissioned “specialist” base.

While the first networks are focused on supporting pupils with autism, the DfE said it plans to roll out more with other specialisms.

Meetings take place on a half-termly basis, focusing on topics which have been identified by participants, including curriculum and assessment, staff development and teaching strategies.

Participants range from those who have established inclusion bases to those looking to set one up from scratch.

## Inclusion at the heart

Antonios Siorovigkas, who leads the additional resourced provision (ARP) at Acland Burghley School in Camden, said they were chosen as lead secondary practitioner because the government could “see our model and ethos as something that can work for a number of schools across the country”.

While SEND pupils – which make up 26 per cent of the ‘1,200-strong’ cohort – access the ARP for more than half of their timetable, they can also access mainstream classes for subjects in which they excel.

All staff have received specialist training, which puts inclusion at the heart of the school’s ethos, SENCO Billy Pinches explained.

“If ARP is siloed just for students who have an ARP placement, not only are you not being inclusive, but you’re not seeing the wider



picture.

“There’s a lot that all students can learn from students with additional needs and vice versa,” he added.

A similar model of inclusion has been adopted at Allen Edwards Primary School, which leads the primary school network for autism inclusion bases. Run by deputy headteacher Nicola Harris, sessions so far have had up to 350 attendees.

“The only way to make our inclusion base feel part of the school is if it starts with the main school,” Harris said.

Leaders looked at their SEND and behaviour policies and made adaptations where necessary to cater for pupils with additional needs.

Harris said this means they have one model “to meet the needs of our whole community, rather than creating separation of the resource base and mainstream ... the aim is to make it be just part of who we are, rather than an add on”.

Unlike Acland Burghley, pupils spend nearly all their time in the resourced provision, learning a bespoke curriculum. But all staff have received autism training and are encouraged to interact with pupils so that “children feel confident as they’re moving around parts of the school and not just their resource-based classrooms”, Harris said.

## Support for the journey

Both network leaders said they wanted to share their journeys of creating

inclusive practices with schools.

“I think it’s very easy, especially when supporting a network of schools, for us to go and say, ‘this is what we do, and everything works and everything is great,’” Siorovigkas said.

“But actually, it then becomes so much more difficult for network participants to approach and implement all the stages.

“We understand that different schools have different contexts, and they are going to work in a different way – and we want to support schools on that journey.”

Harris agreed that Allen Edwards has “had the luxury of having a bit more time to do this,” but “lots of schools are going to be setting up inclusion classrooms much faster”.

“So, the network is hopefully going to support so that their journey doesn’t have to look so up and down.”

Schools Week asked the DfE how many national inclusion base peer networks were planned to launch, and what specialisms they will be, but did not receive a response.

It comes after the DfE announced an expectation for all secondary schools to have an inclusion base, and all primary school pupils to be able to access an inclusion base, as part of wide-ranging SEND reforms.

The DfE has not said by when schools should have a base. Guidance on how to run the bases will be published in the spring.



Georgia Gould

# Keep training staff to support children in care, Ofsted says

**FREDDIE WHITTAKER**

**FREDDIE@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**

School and college staff need continuous specialist training to “better understand and respond to the needs of children in care”, Ofsted has said.

Research by the watchdog found issues which “often disrupted continuity” and were “barriers to progress” for children in care.

Inspectors found “inconsistencies in local authority processes, high staff turnover and limited availability of external agencies”.

Differences in access to pupil premium plus funding and personal education plan (PEP) processes “created inequities and increased workload for staff”.

Ofsted’s research was based on focus groups and surveys of inspectors and virtual school heads – leaders who sit within local authorities with a statutory responsibility for the education of children in care.

Inspectors also carried out 15 research visits – 10 to schools, four to general FE colleges and one to a sixth-form college.

The research found support for children was most effective when staff were well trained.

“Leaders who invested in specialist professional development, particularly in understanding the needs of care-experienced children and the impact that issues such as trauma can have on children



in care, were better equipped to create supportive environments.”

But staff access to high-quality training was “inconsistent, especially in college settings.”

“Staff showed a keen interest in having more targeted, practical training. To improve outcomes for children in care, it is essential that all staff, regardless of role or setting, receive access to relevant and sustained professional development.”

Some schools and colleges visited for the research reported that access to resources and virtual school provision “often depended on which local authority a child was placed under, creating a ‘lottery’ effect”.

## Deep understanding

Despite the difficulties, “the leaders of most of the schools and colleges visited demonstrated a deep understanding of each learner’s circumstances”.

The report recommended “ongoing specialist training for school and college staff, to better

understand and respond to the needs of children in care.

“Training should be continuous rather than one-off, with regular refresher sessions.”

It also called for a standardised national approach to PEP formats, funding approvals and virtual school provision.

Collaboration between schools, colleges and councils should be improved through “shared protocols and expectations”.

And councils should “ensure ongoing support for care-experienced young people beyond 16, including effective PEPs”.

The report said colleges needed extra support for “mentoring, emotional support and academic help, alongside early transition planning with clear routes into education, employment or training”.

Chief inspector Martyn Oliver said the report highlighted “the fantastic work some schools and colleges are doing to support these children’s progress”.

But it is “also clear that we need a more consistent national approach to local authority support and practice”.

Oliver added: “Understanding how leaders meet the needs of vulnerable children is my top priority, and a golden thread running through all our education inspections under the renewed framework.”

“I hope this report’s findings help leaders and decision-makers to understand how children in care are best supported in their education, so that no child falls through the gaps.”

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | LYDIA@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

## Chartered College of Teaching to take over Teacher Development Trust

The Teacher Development Trust is to become part of the Chartered College of Teaching, the professional development charity has announced.

TDT will be absorbed by the professional body for teachers this summer, in what its leader described as an “exciting” move that will “protect the legacy” of the 14-year-old charity.

CEO Gareth Conyard said the decision “follows a period of thoughtful reflection about how best to protect and grow our mission in the long term”.

He said TDT had “achieved significant impact” since it was founded in 2012 as a charity focused on improving professional development, working with more than 10,000

teacher and school leaders.

Conyard described the wider schools’ market as “a tough place”, adding: “Rather than waiting until circumstances force change, we have chosen to act proactively and strategically, ensuring that our learning, resources and impact can continue and grow.”

Charity Commission records show TDT brought in £2.76 million in the year to April 2025, of which £2.32 million came from government contracts and around £97,000 from donations and legacies. Its total expenditure was £2.81 million.

The charity will gift its assets and reserves to the chartered college as part of the move.

TDT runs training courses and carries out

research around professional development, such as its landmark, state-of-the-nation report on CPD published last year.

TDT said both it and the CCT were “committed to completing delivery of the final cohorts and re-sit assessments associated with NPQs”, and “collaborating closely to ensure participants enjoy a seamless transition”.

Those finishing NPQs with TDT “will be fully supported”, Conyard said.

TDT took on its last cohort of NPQs (national professional qualifications) in autumn 2024 and will be delivering the final results this autumn.

Conyard and TDT staff will help support “a careful and responsible transition”, before moving elsewhere.

# End of advisory boards leaves civil servants with ‘monopoly on wisdom’

EXCLUSIVE

JACK DYSON

JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Most behind-closed-doors meetings that once analysed plans for the future of schools have already been canned, *Schools Week* can reveal, as ministers prepare to scrap the controversial gatherings entirely.

One regional advisory board has not assembled in the past 14 months, prompting one leader to note that some groups “have essentially ceased to exist”.

But, with the meetings – which are designed to inform officials on the decisions – due to end this month, the government has been warned that it risks handing civil servants a “monopoly on wisdom”.

Mark Boylan, a Sheffield Hallam University professor of education, said: “Whatever the issues with the composition of advisory boards in the past and the lack of representation of community schools, at least they were senior leaders who understood how schools work, the process of transferring schools, supporting schools.

“The regional officers do not have really detailed, close local knowledge of all the schools in their region – nor could they.”

## Rulings ‘in isolation’

Advisory boards consist of current and former academy bosses and are intended to inform, scrutinise and challenge regional director rulings on trust growth plans. From next month, regional directors will decide on the applications without their help.

Plans set to be considered by senior civil servants will continue to be published online each month, with their decisions released later.

However, Chiltern Learning Trust CEO and advisory board member Adrian Rogers believes it will leave decision makers with “a lack of local knowledge”, with rulings made “more in isolation”.

## Information deficit

Association of School and College Leaders general secretary Pepe Di’Iasio urged the



Department for Education to keep channels open for leaders and other experts to “provide advice and feed into this process”.

One board member said regional directors often have “temperature checks” during meetings to understand “where the sector was”.

Under the new system, there will be “a deficit in terms of their information base for decisions and their understanding of what is going on on the ground”.

And, in the absence of the meetings, there is a “danger ... certain figures or certain MATs may, due to relationships and size, come to dominate that informal space”.

## Most meetings cancelled

*Schools Week* analysis of advisory board documents shows just 33 of the 79 meetings (42 per cent) scheduled over the past 12 months actually went ahead. Just 8 per cent were cancelled the year before.

Our analysis suggests the north-east advisory board has not met since 2024. The east of England was the only region not to have had a cancellation in the past three years.

Dr Jenny Blunden, a south-west advisory board member and Truro and Penwith Academy Trust chief, noted some boards “have essentially ceased to exist”.

Another board member attributed this to a “definite drop in the number of academisations going through”, following Labour’s decision to axe three expansion grants towards the end of 2024.

The loss of appetite is reflected in the figures.

On average, 17 conversion applications were lodged each month last year, compared to 59 in 2024 and 2023.

## Transparency questions

Advisory boards have long been criticised for lacking transparency. *Schools Week* analysis three years ago found just one in 10 meetings received public representations.

Officials have said they will continue to provide advance notice of proposals to be considered and all representations will still “be considered by decision makers”.

## ‘Monopoly on wisdom’

The DfE said it “remain[s] committed to being transparent and accountable in our decision-making practice”.

Rulings will be published as they are now: when decisions have been made by regional directors outside of meetings, the only details included are whether it was approved or rejected and if “further actions” are required. They do not give reasons.

Boylan argued that the changes will leave regional directors with a “monopoly on wisdom”.

Pointing to situations in which underperforming schools are forced to academise or move trusts, he added: “The proposal ... is made within the office of the regional director and then [under the new system] the office of the regional director makes the decision without the input of anybody else. What’s the point?”

## Why do it?

The government said the change was being made as the schools white paper “sets out that it will renew its approach to decision making” by updating commissioning guidance. It is not clear when these changes will be made.

The white paper said that “demanding expectations” will be set through new trust standards “by overhauling the school trust quality descriptions”.

The DfE did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

# We need help with new RSHE training, schools tell DfE

**RUTH LUCAS**

[RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK)

Schools have been left in the dark over when training grants will be made available to help them implement new relationship and sex guidance from September.

The Department for Education (DfE) unveiled its proposed changes to the RSHE guidance in July. Ministers ditched the previous government's plan for age limits on certain topics and a section forbidding teaching about gender identity.

Primary schools will be encouraged to teach about same-sex parents, and there will be a new emphasis on misogyny and sexual violence, deepfakes and sextortion.

The DfE promised that teaching grants would be made available to some schools "from early 2026" to help "staff tackle these challenges with confidence".

But the wider government violence against women and girls strategy published in December said that schools would be selected for funds from next year, along with the launch of a £5 million healthy relationships pilot delivered by external partners in September.

School leaders' union NAHT and the Sex Education Forum have called on ministers to clarify when support will be made available for schools.

Lucy Emmerson, chief executive of the Sex Education Forum, said: "Government has promised much-needed support for schools through RSHE training grants, yet there are still no details about when these start or how



many schools will benefit."

Emmerson said the quality of lessons "leans heavily on teachers having the confidence to broach the new mandatory topics".

She added: "We call on ministers to explain what support schools will get before the September 2026 implementation deadline, and to commit with stakeholders on the long-term strategy for properly trained and supported RSHE workforce."

Sarah Hannafin, head of policy at NAHT, added that "no funding or training has been provided to schools to prepare them for

delivery" of the new content.

"For learning to be effective, teachers need to be confident in their knowledge and have access to high quality resources," she added.

It comes after the government issued updated draft guidance on how schools should support pupils questioning their gender.

The document states that schools should take a "very careful approach in relation to social transition".

It also states that parents should be involved in the "vast majority" of cases in which a child questions their gender.

**EXCLUSIVE**

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | [LYDIA@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:LYDIA@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK)

## English support programme expanded to secondaries

The English hubs programme will be expanded to secondary schools from September following a "successful" pilot, the Department for Education (DfE) has confirmed.

Launched in 2018, the programme aims to boost phonics teaching, early language and reading for pleasure in primaries, especially among pupils who are struggling.

A recent DfE report found that the £100 million scheme has boosted pupil outcomes and "broader literacy".

Following a "successful pilot" earlier this academic year, it will be expanded to

secondary schools across the country in the next year, the DfE said.

Secondaries will have access to specialist support, and "evidence-based assessments" to provide targeted interventions for pupils who need extra support.

The DfE did not provide more details of the roll-out or whether it would come with additional funding.

A spokesperson said that it would "ensure that specialist reading support is available for the children who need it, making sure they can fully engage with the whole curriculum, succeed – both in and out of the

classroom – and reap the many benefits that reading and literacy can bring".

Last October, the DfE announced a focus on reading in secondary years, with plans to introduce a new mandatory year 8 reading test.

The government has committed £28.3 million to help deliver training to primary schools to ensure that children are reading fluently by the time they leave, and for a new "unlocking reading" professional development programme to improve reading provision in secondaries.

# College teachers earn 20% less than in schools

**ANVIKSHA PATEL**

**ANVIKSHA.PATEL@FEWEEK.CO.UK**

College teachers earn nearly £10,500 less than those working in schools, the widest pay gap in at least 15 years, new research has found.

The findings from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) reveal teaching staff working for further education providers earn on average 20 per cent less than their peers in secondary schools.

The disparity has widened sharply in recent years, with researchers warning that sustained funding increases will be needed if colleges are to close the gap and recruit enough teachers.

While average UK earnings have grown by 4 per cent since 2010, FE teacher pay has dropped 18 per cent in real terms.

In 2010, the median FE teacher salary was £32,645, compared with £36,756 for secondary school teachers — a gap of about 11 per cent. The difference narrowed slightly during the 2010s but began widening again from 2020-21.



By 2024-25, the median FE teacher salary stood at £39,355, compared with £49,789 for secondary school teachers, leaving a pay gap of almost £10,500.

“School teachers’ pay has also dropped in relative terms, but the drop for FE teachers has been far larger. This data reinforces the impression that FE teacher pay is now far less competitive than it was in the recent past,” the report said.

Recent analysis from the Institute for Fiscal Studies revealed that per-pupil funding for 16 to 18-year-olds, the main income source for many colleges, has declined by 8 per cent in real terms over the past 15 years.

NFER researchers said this reinforces its conclusion that the 20 per cent deficit in FE teacher pay is largely driven by colleges and other providers’ inability to afford higher pay.

The Department for Education further stung leaders this week after it announced a 0.5 per cent rise to the 16 to 19 funding base rate, despite promising real-terms increases.

The NFER called for a “sustained” effort over several years to sufficiently fund colleges to pay teachers more.

School teacher salaries are nationally binding and set through a recommendation by the School Teachers’ Review Body, which is then approved by the secretary of state. In contrast, colleges are responsible for setting staff pay themselves.

NFER education workforce lead Jack Worth said: “The disparity between school and indeed industry salaries has serious consequences for recruitment and retention, particularly in high-priority areas like construction, engineering and health, which then means key courses cannot run.”

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# Thrive approach cuts absence and exclusion rates, study shows

EXCLUSIVE

RUTH LUCAS

RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

A pastoral approach aimed at early identification of needs used by thousands of schools helped to reduce exclusions and improved the wellbeing of pupils with SEND, an evaluation has found.

The Thrive approach, which has been implemented by 2,800 schools, aims to “help schools understand and respond to pupils’ emotional needs in a developmentally informed and preventative way, promoting inclusion and engagement”.

Participating schools identify “thrive practitioners”, usually staff working in pastoral roles. They take part in a 12-week course learning about the reasons behind dysregulated behaviour.

These licensed practitioners then use an online platform – Thrive Online – where staff members can create different types of plans for pupils.

Classroom teachers can create a whole class plan, which gives them an overview of needs and interventions. They can then create specific behaviour plans for individuals in their class, which gives them action points.

Finally, a licensed practitioner can create a plan for pupils with unmet needs or persistent behavioural issues. These will be “intensive” plans with action points to give teachers both in-depth pupil profiles and an overview of class needs.

Staff can also participate in training on how to use the platform, which gives strategies and activities for individual pupils.

Thrive runs networks for participating schools to interact and get support from experts, and a family programme which creates action plans specifically for use in the home.

A two-year independent evaluation of 2,600 participating schools by ImpactEd found a 27 per cent lower exclusion rate than the national average during the 2023-24 year.

This equates to around four fewer exclusions per 1,000 pupils per year compared with national averages.

## £170,000 lifetime cost

According to the Institute for Public Policy Research, each permanent exclusion carries an estimated lifetime cost to the state of £170,000.



Thrive schools also experienced 3 per cent lower absence rates compared with national averages, and a 15 per cent lower severe absence rate.

Participating schools also saw their average SEND wellbeing scores increase from 3.33 to 3.49 between autumn 2023 and summer 2024, equivalent to 5 per cent. This compared with a national wellbeing score of 3.48.

Wellbeing scores for staff in primary schools were also higher than national rates, with average rates increasing by 4.8 per cent from 45.86 to 48.05 between autumn 2023 and summer 2024. This remains higher than the national average of 43.9.

Evidence from interviews with participating schools said the findings were “linked to earlier identification of needs, improved emotional regulation and more consistent, preventative responses to behaviour across staff teams”.

Vic White implemented the Thrive approach at Keyingham Primary School in Hull, part of the Consortium Academy Trust. While suspension rates were never “exceptionally high”, the school saw no suspensions in the two years after it adopted the approach.

White said it helps all staff members to understand why children are behaving in a certain way, allowing them to “stay curious rather than furious”.

She added: “Knowing the science behind it was a huge, huge impact professionally. Because there is a stem inside you that decides whether you are regulated or dysregulated and decides on your physiological response.”

White has been tasked with implementing the strategy at another of the Consortium Academy

Trust schools, Cottingham High School in Cottingham, Yorkshire.

While they have already reduced suspensions at Cottingham, White said the “pace of change is slower” due to dealing with older children with often more complex needs.

## Help for parents

At secondary level the approach has also helped to improve relationships and communication with parents.

“For a lot of parents, parenting a teenager in 2026 is terrifying,” White said. But the family plans ensure that parents can understand that their child’s behaviour is based on science.

This helped parents to understand that “there’s nothing wrong with your child, this is what they’re meant to do now. How can we help you keep them safe while they do it?”

Thrive’s director, Tom Preston, said the evaluation “provides the clearest indication yet of the impact Thrive’s wellbeing-centred approach can have in the areas that matter most to schools”.

Danielle Jones, director of ImpactEd Evaluation, said it shows “how consistently schools describe the way relational, trauma-sensitive practice like the Thrive approach supports pupil wellbeing, behaviour and staff confidence, alongside reductions in exclusions and more stable attendance”.

Thrive, part of the Supporting Education Group recruitment agency, currently offers free apprenticeship routes for the training, which lasts 14 to 15 months. Alternatively, the 12-week training course costs £1,720. A Thrive Online annual subscription costs schools £5 per pupil.

## INVESTIGATION

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# Soaring cost of private provision revealed as ministers plan curbs

CHAMINDA JAYANETTI  
NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Councils are spending up to four times as much per pupil on private special schools as state special schools, with private placement costs growing twice as fast over four years.

The findings of a Schools Week investigation come as the government gears up to rein in spending on private special schools.

Analysis of freedom of information data by Schools Week from 41 councils found the average cost per pupil of places in local independent and non-maintained special schools is forecast to be 37 per cent higher this year than in 2022-23.

Over the same period, the cost of state special school places is due to rise by 17 per cent.

According to data obtained from 51 councils, the average forecast per-pupil cost for private or non-maintained placements in the same council area this year is £57,074. This rises to £65,528 for placements in a different council area.

The state special school equivalent is £23,907.

It comes after the schools white paper's proposed SEND reforms outlined plans to rein in spending on private special schools via measures including a new banding system.

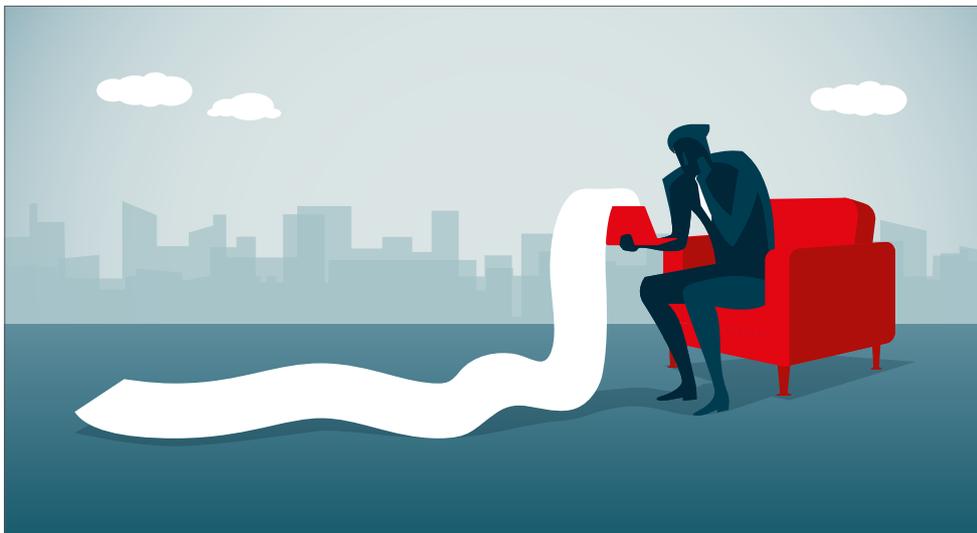
The consultation report warned that "some placements" in independent special schools are "contributing to unsustainable financial pressures" on councils "without clear evidence they are leading to better quality support, outcomes and value for money".

There are three types of special schools: state special schools, independent special schools and non-maintained special schools, which are private but do not turn a profit. Under the proposals, all special schools will be subject to the new funding bands.

FOI responses illustrate the disparities highlighted in the SEND consultation.

## Huge disparities

Placements by Essex County Council in independent and non-maintained special schools were forecast to cost on average of



**‘We are concerned that we're seeing public funding being diverted away from children's outcomes’**

£89,000 per pupil this year, compared to £20,600 in state special schools.

Essex council said its private placements "provide services as part of a package built around the child's needs" which can't be met by mainstream schools.

"This, along with additional support for one-to-one assistance, overnight care, specialist trained staff and smaller classroom sizes means the cost of these placements will continue to increase with inflation."

In Newham, private and non-maintained placements are set to cost an average of £83,000 locally and £134,000 outside the borough this year, compared to £43,000 for state special school settings.

Newham council said it supports reforms that increase specialist capacity, strengthen inclusive support in mainstream schools and bring greater transparency and consistency to specialist placements.

Other councils reported huge expected increases in private place costs compared to state. Oldham's average spend on out-of-area private and non-maintained placements is set

to balloon by 163 per cent between 2022 and this year.

The increase for local private places is set to be 130 per cent, while the increase for state special school places is forecast as 10 per cent.

Mohon Ali, Oldham's cabinet member for education and skills, said "reasons cited" for the rapid growth of costs include inflation, staff costs and complexity of needs. The council would welcome a "national framework" to make the cost of specialist provision "clearer and more consistent", he said.

Blackburn's spend on in-area private placements is forecast to rise by 145 per cent over the past four years. The change for state places is 13 per cent. The council was approached for comment.

## Ballooning costs

The consultation provided little detail on the cost banding proposal, which follows years of concerns over the ballooning costs of private placements.

"We are concerned that we're seeing public funding being diverted away from children's

## INVESTIGATION

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outcomes and into profiteering,” Heather Sandy, chair of the inclusive education policy network at the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS), said.

“Not all cases, not in all settings – but we are concerned that we’re seeing that.”

She highlighted the role of private equity investors, given the large profit margins they have made in the children’s care home sector.

“That escalation in the charging of fees is possible because there are multiple children for every place,” she added, “and, if they want to sell at a high price, they’ll be able to sell at a high price.”

Accusations of profiteering are strongly refuted by the National Association of Special Schools, which represents many independent specialist settings.

“I accept that there is profit-making,” said its chief executive, Claire Dorer. “I accept that there are one or two providers that appear on the face of figures to have a high profit margin.

“But ‘profiteering’ suggests that they are whacking up the price per student on the basis of there being more demand than there is supply. And I haven’t seen good evidence of that.”

Dorer said profit margins need to be examined over many years in order to demonstrate profiteering.

“Typically, firms have years where they have higher profit, then years where they have much lower profit ... I would be quite open to there being more scrutiny.

“The bit that I think is problematic is the rushing to the language of profiteering in the face of really very limited data.”

She argued against comparing per-pupil costs in independent and state special schools, partly as state special schools are “chronically underfunded” and therefore “not a benchmark of virtue”.

Campaigners also fear a banded cost structure could have unintended consequences.

“There’s a real risk that the profit-making entities exit the market in a rapid and disorderly fashion,” Matt Keer, of Special Needs Jungle, said.

“I suspect it’s not just going to drive excessive profit out of this sector – there’s a risk that it could drive some fairly unique charitable non-profit-making provision, that the state has not chosen to replicate, out of the sector too.”



Claire Dorer



## ‘What if your market analysis doesn’t fit your stated policy? It feels rushed’

### Exposed settings

He warned that settings which cater to “low incidence, high need” disabilities, such as vision or hearing impairment, could be most exposed because the needs are not common enough to make dedicated state special schools viable in most council areas.

It will also be difficult to agree how much funding should be attached to each type and level of need.

Keer’s research shows huge variations in the top-up funding paid by councils for different categories of SEND, creating a postcode lottery for education providers.

“The approach is very much about standardising cookie-cutter shapes of provision,” he added, “and we’re talking particularly at the complex end here – children whose multiple interlocking needs sometimes literally defy categorisation.”

Dorer said a banding system will need input from both SEND experts and economists to decide what level of surplus needs to be built into placements to keep services sustainable and developing.

She said similar funding schemes had been tried before, such as the Learning and Skills Council’s post-16 high-needs funding matrix in the 2000s.

“Over time the more complex students got pushed off-matrix and were

basically spot purchased one-to-one because the funding did not cover cost,” she said.

Simon Knight, joint headteacher at Frank Wise School, a state special all-through school in Oxfordshire, supports moving towards “greater equity of resource allocation”, so that comparable needs are funded with comparable resources.

“A national funding system has the potential to achieve this,” he said, “but it will require careful thought to ensure that implementation reflects the range of need that organisations support, minimises the incentives to catastrophise the child for financial benefit and limits bureaucracy, while also creating greater predictability of funding.”

The Department for Education is planning to launch a market analysis to underpin its proposals. But Dorer questioned why the analysis did not take place before the plans were published.

“What if your market analysis doesn’t fit your stated policy? It feels rushed, it feels ill considered, and it feels political, rather than thinking about the system we want to end up with.”



Simon Knight

# Parental complaints to Ofsted increase by 5%

**LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS**

**LYDIA@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**

Complaints to Ofsted about schools have risen by 5 per cent in a year, new data reveals, with parents being urged not to bypass their school's internal processes.

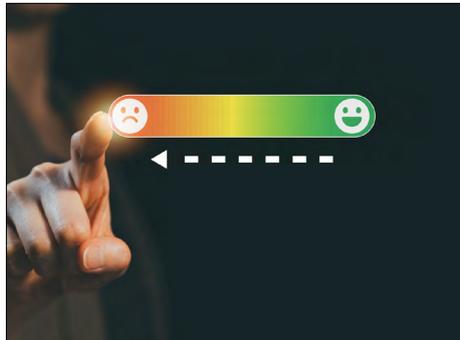
The inspectorate received 16,700 complaints about schools in the 2024-25 financial year, a rise from 15,900 the previous year and equating to more than 45 complaints each day.

But, despite the increase in volume, the proportion of complaints considered to qualify for investigation fell from 12 per cent (1,860) in 2023-24 to 9 per cent (1,710).

Last year, 91 per cent of cases were classed as "non-qualifying", up from 88 per cent the previous year.

Ofsted stressed that to qualify for investigation, a parent should first have followed "all local complaint routes", though the watchdog has power to waive this in serious cases.

The complaint must "raise a serious issue that affects the whole school". It must relate to



one of six areas: quality of education, quality of leadership, how far education meets the range of pupils, educational standards, the schools' contribution to pupil wellbeing, and the "spiritual, moral, social and cultural development" of pupils.

In a blog post published on Wednesday alongside the new data, national director for education Lee Owston stressed that Ofsted does "not have powers to investigate individual safeguarding matters" and refers these cases to councils or police.

Seventy per cent of all complaints considered

last year contained safeguarding concerns.

He added that it "simply isn't the case" that the increase in complaints is leading to more urgent inspections.

Twenty-five immediate inspections were triggered by complaints last year, compared to 35 the previous year. In 31 other cases, complaints led to scheduled inspections being brought forward. This was down from 67 cases in 2023-24.

In 93 per cent of qualifying cases, information was retained to be considered at the next scheduled inspection.

Owston said that parents with concerns "should first go through their school's internal processes". Ofsted regularly sees examples of parents not doing this, he added, "or bypassing the school entirely".

Owston added: "It is important that parents can come to us if they have come to the end of a school's own processes. But we want to be clear that we never rush to inspect without carefully considering whether this is the right and proportionate thing to do, in the interests of pupils."



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# Sixth forms face real-terms cut in funding

## SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER

NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

School sixth forms and colleges face a real-terms cut in their funding next year, leaders have warned, after the government confirmed that rates for 16 and 17-year-olds will rise by just 0.5 per cent.

Ministers have been accused of breaking a promise for a real-terms funding increase for 16 to 19-year-olds made in last year's white paper to ease demographic pressures.

The Department for Education confirmed this week that the national funding rate for 16 and 17-year-old learners will only rise by 0.5 per cent in the academic year 2026-27, from £5,105 to £5,133. This is the smallest increase since funding rates were frozen in 2021-22.

Claire Green, post-16 and skills specialist at the ASCL leaders' union, said the new funding rate "does not align" with the white paper ambition, "nor does it support the government's previous commitment to improving the financial stability of the sector".

She added: "The money that has been given to this part of the sector is being spread extremely thinly because student numbers are growing.

"The paltry 0.5 per cent increase in the learner rate next year means that colleges and school sixth forms will be seeing a real-terms cut in the amount per student that they receive."



### T-level uplift removed

Officials have also removed the 5 per cent uplift to the national T-level funding rate for several subjects. The uplift was introduced to support extra costs associated with the early rollout of T-levels.

T-levels with technical qualifications introduced before 2022 will have their 5 per cent uplift removed in 2026-27, even if their occupational specialisms were introduced after 2022.

This means the funding rate has dropped by 4.3 per cent from last year for T-levels in digital, construction, education and early years and health and science.

The funding rate for band 9 "very large" T-levels of 1,830 total planned hours for the programme's two years will be reduced to £14,772 in 2026-27 from this year's rate of £15,430.

Band 8 (comprising an average of 1,680

planned hours) will reduce from £14,146 to £13,544.

Band 7 will shrink from £12,864 to £12,316 and band 6 will fall from £11,154 to £10,680.

Sitting alongside these funding bands are three additional "uplifted" funding rates across bands 6 to 8.

The 5 per cent uplift has applied to T-levels in business and administration, legal, finance and accounting, engineering and manufacturing, agriculture and animal care, creative and design and marketing.

The uplifted band 6 will fund the marketing, finance, accounting and legal services T-levels at £11,214 per student across the two-year qualification.

Uplifted band 7 has been boosted to £12,932, affecting T-levels such as management and administration, craft and design and media, broadcast and production.

Meanwhile, all three engineering and manufacturing T-levels and most routes under agriculture, environmental and animal care courses will be boosted to £14,222 per student under the uplifted band 8.

Ministers have also confirmed plans to limit new T-levels to 1,080 guided learning hours, lower than the current minimum of 1,180 hours.

The move follows the publication of new starts data which showed ministers failed to meet their T-level recruitment target for 2025-26 by nearly a fifth.

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## Ministers delay BTEC defunding

Ministers have agreed to extend funding for all level 3 diplomas and extended diplomas into 2026-27, giving colleges and sixth forms a significant reprieve just six months before the start of the new academic year.

Defunding will now begin from autumn 2027, instead of this year, in finance, digital, education and early years – the subject areas chosen for the first V-levels.

Further defunding will follow in 2028 in business and administration, care services, construction and the built environment, engineering and manufacturing, health and science, legal, sales, marketing and procurement, and sport.

It means popular courses like the BTEC extended diploma in health and social care will continue to be funded for another two years.

A transition document was published yesterday which set out the arrangements for the new qualifications system, including the new defunding timeline for specific courses.

Until now, the Department for Education's position has been that "funding for all qualifications [with] 720 guided learning hours (GLH) and over in T-level areas will be removed in 2026 and 2027".

This timeline had prompted warnings from the sector that tens of thousands of students would face a qualification gap from September 2026.

A DfE spokesperson described the decision as a "phased, sustainable approach for providers to transition to the reformed system".

V-levels will launch in three subjects and

begin teaching in colleges from September 2027, the DfE also confirmed this week.

Ministers have decided to design V-levels to the same qualification size as one A-level – 360 guided learning hours – so that students can choose to take a "mix and match" selection of vocational and academic qualifications.

Ahead of its full response to a public consultation on reforming the post-16 qualification landscape, the DfE has revealed that V-levels will be taught in digital, education and early years, and finance and accounting from September 2027.

Further V-levels will follow in 2028 in eight subjects including business, health, care and construction, with four more subjects coming in 2029 before the roll-out is completed in 2030.

## Labour suspends minister's father over support for former councillor

**RUTH LUCAS**

[RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK)

A former children's services boss and father of an education minister has been suspended by the Labour Party after allegedly fundraising for a former councillor later convicted of attempting to pervert the course of justice.

Roy Bailey, who served as cabinet member for children and young people at Bracknell Forest Council for three years and as councillor for 29 years, stepped down from his post alongside council leader Mary Temperton this month pending investigation.

Early education minister Olivia Bailey, Roy Bailey's daughter, said she fully supported the investigation into her father's "deeply misguided actions". It is understood she had no knowledge of or involvement in any of the matters under investigation.

The case concerns Naheed Ejaz, the former mayor of Bracknell Forest, in Berkshire. She stepped down as mayor and a councillor in November 2024.



Her son Diwan Khan, 41, was convicted at Winchester Crown Court on February 11 of raping a 15-year-old girl and supplying her with vodka and MDMA in July 2024.

Ejaz, 61, was also convicted of intending to pervert the course of public justice after telling Khan to hide his phone, believed to contain evidence of the assault, on his arrest at their address in Bracknell.

Roy Bailey and Temperton allegedly raised funds for Ejaz when she faced financial difficulty in November 2024, shortly after she stepped down as mayor. There is no suggestion they were aware of her or her son's crimes.

The pair said in a joint statement to the Reading Chronicle: "We wholeheartedly apologise for this error in judgment. It was a completely misguided act of attempted charity made without the full facts.

"We have spent decades in public service, and we are both mortified that an attempt at helping someone we believed to be in crisis could be construed as minimising or detracting from these appalling crimes."

Olivia Bailey said: "Violence against women and girls is utterly abhorrent, and it is right that justice has now been served in this case.

"I fully support the Labour Party's investigation into my father's deeply misguided actions."

Bracknell Forest Council's children and young people cabinet position will be covered under interim arrangements, chief executive of the council Susan Halliwell said.

A spokesperson for Labour said the party "takes all complaints seriously and they are fully investigated in line with our rules and procedures, and any appropriate action is taken".

Bailey and Temperton have remained as independent councillors pending investigation. Both were approached for further comment.

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | [LYDIA@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:LYDIA@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK)

## DfE's £15m increase in marketing spending is 'slap in the face' for families

Department for Education spending on advertising and marketing has increased by £15 million in just one year, it has revealed. The rise has been described as "a slap in the face" for families.

The department's advertising and marketing soared from £34.6 million in 2022-23 to £49.8 million in 2024-25, minister Olivia Bailey revealed in response to a parliamentary question. This marks a rise of more than 40 per cent.

Bailey said that paid marketing "directly supports operational delivery by helping to recruit more school and college teachers and early years staff".

She said it also helps to ensure that parents are aware of available support and encourages take-up of government-funded technical qualifications and training.

But Munira Wilson MP, the Liberal

Democrats' education, children and families spokesperson, criticised the sum.

She raised it in a children's wellbeing and schools bill debate in the House of Commons on Monday, while discussing a Lib Dem amendment on the adoption and special guardianship support fund (ASGSF), which she described as "a lifeline for families".

"A £15 million increase in DfE advertising is a slap in the face for families in crisis," she later said in a statement.

"While individual adoption and special guardianship grants are being slashed for the most vulnerable children, the DfE is ramping up the spending on self-promotion."

She accused the government of having its priorities "backwards", adding: "It is indefensible to cut direct support for vulnerable children while finding millions more for marketing and glossy campaigns."

Wilson called for the money to be "redirected", saying: "The DfE could halve the advertising budget to reverse the cuts to the ASGSF grants, and finally give children and their carers the stability they deserve."

The DfE was approached for comment but had not responded when *Schools Week* went to press last night.

Bailey previously said that the rising spend "reflects the changing media landscape and high levels of media inflation".

She added that paid-for advertising and marketing is subject to Cabinet Office spending controls, "which ensure taxpayer money is spent cost-effectively".

"Where possible, activity is delivered in-house as part of cross-government campaigns or at low cost through partner coordination."

# Profile

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | FREDDIE@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

## 'Every day something wonderful happens'

A passion for teaching secondary school kids is what gets ASCL president Jo Rowley out of bed each morning. The deputy headteacher talks selling school leadership, the need for more flexible working and why funding is such a headache for rural heads

Jo Rowley never planned to be a deputy headteacher. Now she's the first deputy in decades to serve as president of her union, the Association of School and College Leaders.

"I've always just moved on to other things because I'm interested in them, and I think I can play a valuable part in that role," she says.

"And so my career has kind of evolved, rather than having it planned well in advance."

Rowley is deputy head at Walton High School in Stafford.

Since September, she has been ASCL's president, acting as a figurehead for the organisation. This week she will preside over its conference in Liverpool.

Raised in Walsall in the Black Country, Rowley comes from "very working-class stock". Her parents left school at 14 without academic qualifications. She attended the local comprehensive school.

Her education journey "was almost like a blind discovery experience, because I had no one with experience to tell me what to expect".

She had friends who would "truant for days and days on end, and now nobody seemed to wonder where they were".

### Love of learning

"It was a very difficult school, and you were very much going against the grain if you were someone who was interested in learning.

"And I don't know biologically what went on in my brain, but I was interested in learning," she jokes.

"I think for me, school was full of adults that seemed to know about a different world from the world that I knew.

"They knew about books I'd never heard of. They travelled to other countries, which I hadn't, and they seemed to have a lot of enthusiasm for the things that they'd experienced.

"And I think I enjoyed the fact there was a place to go to that was really positive and full of energy, and I came away with more knowledge in my head."

Rowley developed a passion for sciences, and

went on to study chemistry at the University of Manchester. She eventually did a PhD.

"I was just enjoying the learning experience," she says. "This is back in the day, of course, of maintenance grants. I often wonder, what would I have done now? I definitely wouldn't have done a PhD."

Rowley eventually decided the life of a researcher wasn't "the kind of lifestyle I wanted" so trained to be a teacher, taught chemistry, and took on leadership roles when the opportunity arose.

### Optimistic outlook

ASCL's presidency is usually held by a headteacher or, especially in recent years, an academy trust CEO.

Rowley has used her presidency to champion those in other leadership roles, and believes a more positive message about teaching and leadership is needed nationally.

"I'm an optimistic person at heart, and I go into school not expecting it to be bad," she says. "I go

## Profile: Jo Rowley

into school looking forward to it, and without any shadow of a doubt, every day there's something wonderful that happens.

"Children are wonderful people who say the most bizarre things and bring the most interesting stories in. And I think there's a collegiality amongst teachers, because it is a challenging job that brings reward.

"When I'm in school, I do love that family feeling that you get from working with your colleagues. And I think we all have a role to play and actually selling the positives of the profession."

Rowley says she encourages younger colleagues to pursue leadership roles, urging them to "look at all the good things you can do".

"Look at all those children over there that have benefited because of a decision that you've made that has allowed them to access something that they maybe couldn't access before.

"We need to promote those positives, because it's easy to jump on a negative."

But other incentives are needed. She notes a "lot of the profession" is female, while teaching "does, by and large, require an adult in a specific classroom with 30 children.

"And so the hybrid working or working from home or altering what days you work has historically not been in place in education, but it certainly is coming through."

She actively encourages flexible working.

"As a school leader, I encourage that. Those people give you far more back as a consequence of that decision than if you just blanket say no, because historically, that's not what we do in our profession."

### Funding pot shot

But challenges in teaching and leadership are many and wide-ranging. Rowley's school is in Staffordshire, one of the f40 group of council areas where schools receive the lowest amount of funding.

Part of that is due to demography. Inner-city schools attract more funding because of high levels of disadvantage.

"I'm under no illusion about the challenges my colleagues face and yes, there are schools that definitely, to get those children through the



Jo with her dog Lucy

## 'I enjoyed that there was a place to go that was full of energy'

doors, sat down and to learn something and have something meaningful for education takes more money."

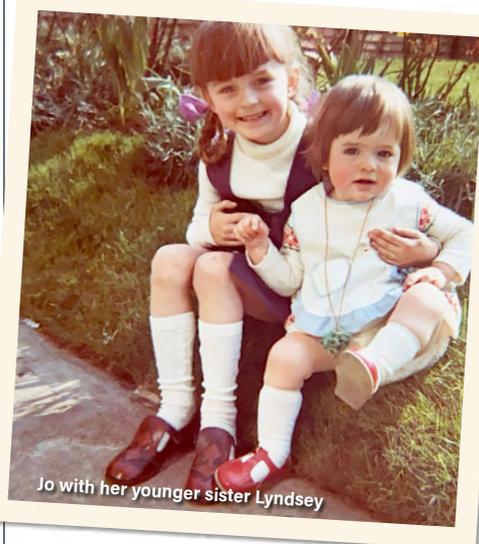
But the "big issue is there's just not enough money in the pot", she says.

"Generally the pot is very small, and if you just keep shuffling the financial deck chairs within that pot, then we're still not really going to solve that disadvantage problem."

The government's schools white paper will shake up deprivation funding for schools, to focus on family income rather than free school meals eligibility. Rowley welcomes the review, but says she'll need to "look at it in more detail".

She describes the white paper more broadly as "very ambitious" and it reads like many of ASCL's concerns about the system have been listened to.

She acknowledges that describing the system of support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities as "broken" is a "well-worn



Jo with her younger sister Lyndsey

phrase", but action is needed because the system "just isn't working".

"We need to do something differently, primarily for the children and their families, but also for the adults that work with those children.

"No adult walks into school saying 'I don't want to help that child', or 'I don't care that you're struggling with X, Y and Z'. But the reality is, we don't have the resources.

"So we're effectively not helping that person, and that puts emotional pressure on the professionals at work with the children, because you go home knowing that you haven't been able to help in the way you wanted."

### Future plans

When not in school or on ASCL business, Rowley enjoys hiking in the Lake District. She says if she hadn't been a teacher, "I'd have probably ended up doing something outside".

She has previously served as her school's acting headteacher. But would she ever take on a permanent headship?

"I don't rule anything out. I think I'll always be engaged in education, having dabbled with other careers as either summer jobs as a student or the PhD.

"What I've learned is that I get my buzz from education. Working with teenagers, in my case, is definitely the thing I want to do.

"Long past the time I should have retired, I'll probably still be doing something to do with education. Because it excites me. It always has, and I'm sure it always will."

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## Opinion

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## JULIE PRENTICE

Director of primary, Swale Academies Trust

### When everyone is SEND trained inclusion is part of your culture

**Julie Prentice shares five things she and trust colleagues learned from developing a SEND training model over the past four years**

With £200 million recently announced to roll out special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) training to all teaching staff as part of the recently published schools white paper, the direction of travel is clear.

Schools will be expected to strengthen SEND expertise across their workforce, and quickly.

But national reform will only succeed if schools can translate policy into practice.

At Swale Academies Trust, we've spent the past four years developing a trust-wide SEND training model, led by our central trust SEND lead Tina Murphy across our 19 schools in the south east.

What began as leadership development has evolved into a whole-workforce approach to inclusion. Here are five lessons we've learned.

#### 1. Focus on leadership rather than compliance

Trusts rightly invest in SENCO development, but we saw a gap at senior leadership.

Too often, senior leadership teams focus on compliance rather than a strategic understanding of SEND.

That leaves SENCOs carrying too much responsibility and reduces the ability for schools to effectively embed inclusion across all areas of school life.

We therefore began training headteachers and senior leaders, building secure knowledge of the SEND code of practice, identification processes, education, health and care plans (EHCPs), adaptive teaching and preparation for adulthood.

We found that securing leadership buy-in was critical to ensure our strategies were confidently lived in practice by our decisionmakers.

#### 2. Make it whole workforce, not specialist-only

SEND expertise must extend even beyond SENCOs and SLTs, because everyone has a role in inclusive practice, from the classroom to the playground and lunch hall.

We designed a layered training programme that deliberately cascades knowledge across curriculum leads, classroom teachers, teaching assistants, pastoral teams and support staff.

By ensuring all staff receive consistent, high-quality training, we've reduced variation between schools, creating shared language, best practice and equal provision for all pupils.

Leaders also explore how to quality-assure provision, engage parents and ensure governors play an active role in monitoring SEND.



“Too often, senior leadership teams focus on compliance”

#### 3. Focus on practical, classroom-ready strategies

The key lesson has been to make training immediately applicable.

Sessions on adaptive teaching, for example, include subject-specific strategies that colleagues can take straight back into lessons.

The more practical and tangible the tools, including toolkits, templates and structured CPD materials, the quicker we have seen them adopted and the more confident and capable our staff feel.

We have also integrated SEND into our induction process for new headteachers. Inclusion is not an add-on. It is part of leadership from day one.

#### 4. Keep training continuous

Training is an ongoing conversation, as the newly launched white paper shows.

A continuous approach is essential as needs shift and statutory expectations evolve.

Termly SEND network meetings, a comprehensive CPD offer and trust-wide guidance ensure professional learning remains ongoing, and fortnightly bulletins help us maintain momentum.

#### 5. Measure impact beyond paperwork

Across our trust, staff confidence has increased significantly.

SEND is no longer viewed as the SENCO's sole domain, but as a collective responsibility.

Senior leaders integrate inclusion into curriculum design, resource allocation and improvement plans with greater assurance.

For pupils, this has meant earlier identification of need, greater consistency in provision and improved access to the curriculum and wider school life. Parents also report clearer communication and stronger leadership oversight.

National reform may set the direction. But for us, the daily reality of inclusion is shaped in classrooms, staffrooms and leadership meetings. Ensuring your training is genuinely helping your staff and achieving impact is crucial.

Our experience suggests that when SEND expertise is embedded across the workforce, inclusion becomes part of school culture rather than an isolated initiative. And when that happens, outcomes improve for all learners.

## Opinion

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## MATTHEW THOMPSON

Principal, Launceston College

### How we help SEND students gain qualifications and independence

**Close communication, working on life skills and connecting with the wider community are among the ways Launceston's alternative resource base serves pupils and their families, says Matthew Thompson**

We know the government is keen for more mainstream schools to provide comprehensive support for SEND children.

I'm pleased that at Launceston College we're already ahead of the game as we have a successful on-site alternative resource base (ARB).

All ARB students have EHCPs for autism or moderate-to-severe learning difficulties, and we now educate 32 students there.

We've significantly contributed to the specialist provision offer in Cornwall, ensuring more SEND students have access to high-quality education and support.

We believe strongly in supporting and encouraging all SEND children to achieve their full potential and our ARB is one of the few in the county where students leave with qualifications.

They gain English, maths, science, vocational life skills and IT qualifications, with some taking GCSEs as well.

Every ARB student also moves on to further education, and we arrange visits to a range of post-16

providers, ensuring students are prepared for life beyond school and have access to opportunities that align with their aspirations.

ARB attendance was exceptional last year, averaging 97.5 per cent. The team reviews attendance every Monday with a target of 96.5 per cent.

The ARB has a proven track record of improving outcomes, illustrated by a student who arrived with attendance below 50 per cent, who now attends 98 per cent of the time.

#### Talking to parents

What makes our ARB thrive is the dedication of our staff to creating a family atmosphere, and how closely they work with parents, having daily communication with some.

It's amazing when they update us on the progress of their children at home and we celebrate every success.

Parents of children with SEND have to manage a lot of different things and developing a close, positive working relationship with them is crucial to ensure everyone involved understands each child's individual needs and strengths.

However, we choose not to hold traditional parents' evenings.

Instead, families are invited into school once a term for a student-led visit where children prepare refreshments, show their work and demonstrate the skills they have



### Feedback from parents has been overwhelmingly positive

learned.

These events also give the parents a chance to connect with each other and chat in an informal way about their children and share experiences they may find helpful.

We also put on more formal workshops, such as sessions with local dental teams, to help support families.

A range of rewards encourage positive attendance and behaviour, including visits to coffee shops or soft play centres, alongside weekly awards ceremonies where students receive badges for great behaviour or progress.

Other activities such as swimming and horse riding also provide students with opportunities to develop their skills.

#### Away from home

Getting students out and connecting with members of the community is key and every year they do a range of activities, such as making Christmas crafts to fundraise for local charities.

Residential experiences are particularly transformative. They're

often the first time students have slept away from home.

It's a sign of the trust our staff earn from parents that they're happy for their children to stay away overnight and we feel it's a brilliant way of showing how much faith we have in the resilience of these children too.

We don't set homework for ARB students. Instead they're encouraged to practise life skills at home, such as making a bed or completing household tasks.

We provide parents with guidance on what young people should be able to do and how to support them to achieve these goals at home. Parents then share what the children have done. This is then celebrated in weekly assemblies.

The feedback from parents has been overwhelmingly positive. Many report students are now routinely engaging in practical tasks such as washing dishes, preparing meals and organising their schoolwork, helping to build their autonomy and confidence.

I couldn't be more proud to celebrate every success with them.

## Opinion

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## SIMON FREEMAN

Managing director, IRIS Education

## Email is the weakest link that could bring down your school

**Email wasn't designed for financial transactions but the message hasn't got through to the many schools that rely on it, warns Simon Freeman**

One in four schools experienced a cybersecurity incident in the last 12 months.

The rise of cloud services, online learning and digital administration has transformed education, but cybercriminals have kept pace, developing increasingly sophisticated ways to steal data and money from schools.

The problem, though, isn't just advanced hacking. Criminals are targeting routine payment processes that rely on email: supplier invoices, trip payments, catering charges, parent contributions and bank detail changes.

For schools and trusts operating with tight budgets and lean teams, cybersecurity demands sustained leadership attention as a core safeguarding responsibility, to protect students and staff while keeping operations secure and reputation intact.

So, what is the risk from email, and how can it be navigated?

### State of school cybersecurity

With more and more schools experiencing attacks from fraudsters, it's clear there's an issue building, and it's one that will only get worse as technology and tactics become more

sophisticated.

Based on our research with education leaders, we found that two in five schools do not have cybersecurity training, and while 78 per cent have a cybersecurity policy, that still leaves more than one in five without one.

This suggests that turning policy into action is proving a challenge in daily school operations.

Data breaches are the biggest worry, with phishing attacks and ransomware close behind.

These concerns have real operational consequences, because when systems go down during an attack, schools can't process payments, communicate with families or access student records.

What ties these threats together is how schools handle financial communications.

Because when bank details, supplier invoices and payment instructions flow through standard email chains, every phishing attempt and impersonation attack has a direct route to school funds. And many of the controls that work elsewhere simply don't apply to everyday email use.

### Why email is vulnerable

Email wasn't designed for financial transactions. Yet schools use it daily to share bank details, confirm supplier invoices and communicate payment instructions.

Each of these routine exchanges creates an opportunity for criminals



## “Criminals exploit a school's trusted identity

to intercept, impersonate or manipulate.

If this happens, cybercriminals target system access through compromised logins, then steal data and divert money. But they also exploit something more valuable: a school's trusted identity.

When staff, families and partner organisations assume communications are legitimate, it becomes far easier to manipulate payment processes.

Many attacks succeed through social engineering rather than technical sophistication, and phishing emails trick staff into handing over credentials, while impersonation attacks mimic senior leaders or suppliers to prompt urgent action.

These tactics work in schools because they exploit busy routines and fragmented processes, hijacking email threads to swap bank details for supplier payments, or sending realistic requests timed exactly when trip payments or catering invoices are due.

### What leaders can do

Leaders can take practical steps to strengthen their organisation's defences, and we've developed a guide that pinpoints a path to safety.

First, be ready when something goes wrong. Build an incident response

plan, ensure everyone knows their role, and test it – because if your team can't act in the first 10 minutes of an attack, damage escalates quickly.

Invest in regular training that reflects the emails staff actually receive and build a no-blame culture so people flag mistakes immediately.

Then focus on technology that reduces risk. Switch on monitoring and alerts, tighten permissions, and implement multi-factor authentication wherever possible.

Most importantly, move high-risk transactions out of email. Use authenticated parent payment portals for trips and catering. Run supplier invoices through your finance system with built-in approval workflows. Verify any bank detail changes through a separate channel, never via email alone.

The good news is that schools don't need unlimited budgets or specialist IT teams to make meaningful progress.

They need leadership that treats payment security with the same seriousness as fire safety, not as a project for someone else to manage, but as a core operational responsibility.

The criminals targeting school finances are organised, patient and persistent. School leaders need to be too.

## Opinion

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LUCY  
FOX

Early years writer  
and specialist

## Reception teaching must adapt to the reality of delayed development

**Weaker communication and self-regulation are issues that cannot be solved by focusing on a shift to measurable, directed tasks, says Lucy Fox**

Reception teachers are consistently noticing patterns within their cohorts that cannot be ignored.

Across the country, more children are starting school with delayed communication and language skills, reduced attention, lower self-regulation and less experience of sustained play.

These are not isolated cases, and this is not a crisis headline. They are patterns discussed quietly in staff rooms, shaping how early years practitioners understand the start of school and what September looks like for many of our four-year-olds.

As the proportion of children working at age-expected levels in foundational areas such as language acquisition declines, our understanding of what day one learning means must adapt.

Communication and language are not peripheral skills. They are not bonus experiences offered to children as part of a writing hook or maths activity. They are foundational to a child's access to learning.

A child with weaker oral language will struggle to communicate needs, engage in conversation, ask questions that deepen play or articulate emotions.

This narrows their access to the curriculum from the outset. Self-regulation is equally critical.

For many, starting school is their first sustained experience outside the home. Without the language to express worry or seek reassurance, the environment can feel overwhelming.

Early language development directly influences comprehension. Without comprehension, participation in learning and attainment are limited. This is not a question of ability, but of access.

### Idealised evidence

The tension appears when data-driven systems begin to shape classroom decision-making more than developmental starting points do.

Written evidence is the easiest form of progress to collect and present. It is often idealised.

When accountability frameworks emphasise measurable literacy and numeracy outcomes, reception classrooms can feel pulled towards early formalisation.

The reception baseline assessment, alongside growing conversation around "school readiness" and "key stage 1 readiness", sends clear system signals.

These inevitably influence practice and increase the risk of environments that do not put the child first.

This is not malicious intent. It is a misalignment between what is valued



## “Classrooms can feel pulled towards early formalisation

and what is needed.

When practitioners feel incentivised to prioritise written outcomes, then time for sustained interaction, modelling and co-regulation can diminish.

The prime areas of the EYFS framework are not secondary to reading, writing and number. They are the gateway to them. When these foundations are assumed rather than secured, gaps can widen beneath apparently secure attainment.

Early formalisation affects all children, not just those who entered with delays.

When classrooms shift too quickly towards a chair for all, worksheet completion or directed tasks, characteristics of effective learning can weaken.

Superficial evidence of progress may increase, but the underlying skills which are vital for enabling independence, resilience and deep thinking may not.

### Protecting adult interaction

All is not lost, however.

Many senior leaders are responding with clear direction. They are protecting intentional adult interaction and strengthening language-rich environments, where conversation, storytelling and sustained shared thinking are the cornerstones of learning.

Written outcomes remain important but are treated as one form of evidence rather than the most valuable assessment of learning.

Schools are also increasingly reviewing passive screen use within reception classrooms, recognising that attention and language develop through language and interaction rather than consumption.

This is a vital step forward as screens are often the focal point of modern classrooms.

Balancing accountability with developmental alignment requires confidence.

It requires leaders to communicate that time invested in talk, play and modelling is not a regression from standards, but the very mechanism through which standards are secured.

Accountability and child development should not be in conflict. They should operate in partnership.

If we do not attend carefully to the prime areas on entry, and if we continue to prioritise outcomes over access, the gap between what children need and what they experience will continue to widen.

In primary education we know this to be true. Gaps created early are significantly harder to close later.

If starting points are shifting, our system response must shift with them.

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## MARC DOYLE

CEO, Quest Trust

### Competition has no place when children start primary school

**Sharing teaching practices and even assets such as minibuses with private nurseries helps children smoothly transition to reception, says Marc Doyle**

Collaboration. Partnerships. Sharing best practice. These are phrases we champion across education.

Yet in one vital phase – the one that sets everything else in motion – they are too often sidelined by competition.

Early years education, particularly between nurseries and primary schools, is where collaboration matters most, and where competition too often takes its place.

As CEO of a trust comprising four primaries, I see every day how school readiness is shaped by what happens before children reach reception.

The recently-published Kindred Squared school readiness survey highlights trends most primary schools encounter each September.

Children arrive with gaps in communication, challenges around physical skills and struggles with independence. These are challenges schools cannot address alone, and they underscore why collaboration with early years providers is essential.

In our own nurseries and schools, we see this first-hand.

Some children start reception without the routines, skills or

independence needed to settle quickly. Some require support with basic self-care well into the first term.

Colleagues point to factors such as prolonged dummy use, increased screen time and reduced opportunities for independent learning before school starts. But the key point is simple. School readiness depends on what happens before the school gates and on how well early years providers and schools work together.

#### Focus on phonics

One example of effective collaboration to overcome this is our partnership with Play Pals, a private voluntary independent nursery operating under our trust's umbrella.

While the two organisations remain legally and financially separate, they work closely in educational terms, with a shared focus on preparing children for school and supporting smooth transitions into reception.

Rather than competing for children, Play Pals acts as a feeder into our schools. This creates a clearer pathway for families and allows staff to align expectations early.

The aim is not only to improve occupancy, but to reduce the disconnect that often exists between nursery provision and the start of formal schooling.

Curriculum alignment is a central



### “Children arrive familiar with sounds and language structures

part of this model. Play Pals has adopted the same frameworks used across Quest schools, including the CUSP curriculum and Little Wandle phonics.

Children are exposed to consistent language, books and learning approaches from an early age. Unusually for a PVI setting, phase one phonics is introduced before reception, so children arrive familiar with sounds and early language structures.

I have seen first-hand that this alignment makes a tangible difference.

Our good level of development outcomes, previously below national averages, are now in line with – and in some cases above – national figures.

During a recent inspection, an Ofsted inspector even noted that without prior knowledge she might have assumed the provision was a school nursery rather than a PVI setting.

#### Pooled resources

The collaboration extends beyond the classroom. Shared resources allow nursery children to take part in swimming lessons for three and four-year-olds using school minibuses, as well as local community trips.

These experiences build confidence, independence and cultural awareness alongside early learning. Children in pre-school also wear school uniform, helping them get used to routines and easing the transition into reception.

Leadership and professional development underpin the model. We have a director of early years who works across nurseries and schools, providing training, oversight and quality assurance.

This role ensures practice is consistent while respecting the expertise of early years practitioners. Schools gain insight into younger children's development, while nursery staff better understand what is expected in reception classrooms.

At a time when policy changes have created tension between school nurseries and private providers, this partnership demonstrates an alternative approach.

By focusing on collaboration rather than competition, we can support children to arrive in reception with confidence and independence.

This partnership has shown us that when schools and nurseries work together, children start school ready to learn – the starting block from which all success in education follows.

# THE RESEARCH LEADER

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



## Success of SEND reforms will hinge on whether staff can cope

### Matt Walker

Senior research manager,  
National Foundation for  
Educational Research



The government's schools white paper presents one of the most significant reforms to England's education and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) systems in a generation.

It signals a shift from a system heavily reliant on statutory plans, towards one centred on school-led support.

The proposed introduction of individual support plans (ISPs) for all pupils with SEND places a legal duty on schools to assess need, plan provision and monitor progress.

This change reflects a longstanding policy ambition: supporting pupils earlier and more consistently without requiring a formal diagnosis or an education, health and care plan (EHCP).

Evidence suggests that early, classroom-based support can improve outcomes when teachers feel confident in adapting teaching and responding to diverse needs. However, the success of this approach depends heavily on workforce capacity.

### 1. SEND as a universal teaching responsibility

The white paper reinforces the expectation that SEND expertise should sit within mainstream classrooms rather than primarily with specialists.

Expanded training in initial teacher education and ongoing professional development could strengthen inclusive practice and reduce reliance on statutory processes. If delivered at scale and with quality, this shift has real potential. But there are risks.

Additional planning, coordination and monitoring responsibilities could increase workload at school-level even as system-level bureaucracy is reduced.

Meaningful change depends on whether schools are given the time, specialist input and staffing needed to meet these expectations.

Recent research also reveals that pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across mainstream schools.

Among schools with the highest rates of pupils with EHCPs, some primary schools educate six times as many pupils with EHCPs than those with the lowest rates, creating highly variable



workforce pressures.

In secondary schools, the difference is around fivefold. This unevenness means the reforms may not be felt equally.

### 2. A changing role for SENCOs

The reforms imply a significant evolution in the role of special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs).

Rather than primarily coordinating statutory processes, SENCOs may increasingly act as:

- leaders of whole-school inclusion
- professional development leads for SEND
- coordinators of multi-agency working
- advisers to senior leadership teams on curriculum and behaviour policy

This elevation of the role could strengthen inclusion if SENCOs are given sufficient authority and protected leadership time.

Without these conditions, however, the reforms may intensify workload pressures.

Indeed, research highlights the high workloads, limited time for strategic activity and a sense of professional isolation among SENCOs.

Transition arrangements may add further pressure on time-stretched SENCOs. As EHCPs are reviewed at key phase transitions, SENCOs, particularly in secondary schools, will need to contribute evidence, coordinate support and engage closely with families.

These pressures are likely to be compounded by the need to support parents through system changes. Managing expectations, explaining new processes and responding to heightened anxieties may add further complexity to SENCOs' workloads.

### 3. The growing importance of trust-level SEND leadership

Although the white paper frames change through schools and local authorities, and there are examples of best practice across the sector, the reality is that SEND systems are increasingly shaped by multi-academy trusts (MATs).

As ISPs and inclusion bases become core parts of the system, trust-level leadership may be critical in managing workforce pressures.

MATs can pool specialist expertise, offer structured professional development and surface data on need and capacity across schools, functions many individual schools may struggle to deliver alone.

The white paper also reiterates the government's ambition for every school to join a trust. Clarifying how MATs will support implementation, and how their responsibilities align with those of local authorities, will be essential.

### 4. Implementation will determine impact

The reforms offer real potential: strengthening early intervention, improving consistency and embedding SEND within everyday teaching.

But successful reform depends not only on policy design. It hinges on the readiness and capacity of the workforce tasked with delivering it.

Policymakers need to consider not just what SEND reform looks like on paper, but whether schools, and SENCOs in particular, have the ongoing support required to bring it to life.

*Week in*

# Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

## FRIDAY

One right-wing paper declared that Nigel Farage's Reform "could lift the ban on new grammar schools being set up" if the Eurosceptics take Downing Street.

But we want to offer an alternative headline: Reform wants to bring back secondary moderns.

We imagine this would be a less popular prospect, given the negative impact that being near a selective school can have on neighbouring institutions.

Given grammar schools have not existed in most of the country for decades, we also imagine the average voter wouldn't take kindly to the school system in their local area becoming MORE competitive!

## MONDAY

Four years ago, England's biggest local authority was criticised by Ofsted for failing to tackle a "lack of willingness" among some schools to "accommodate" children with SEND.

The watchdog also found that Kent County Council had made no progress in addressing any of the nine "significant weaknesses" identified during its previous visit.

And now, with its next inspection looming, the authority is asking schools to write in with their "good news stories" to showcase the county's "collective commitment ... to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND".

Good luck with that!

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The schools bill is back in the House of Commons ... 15 months after it started its passage.

MPs were given little more than an hour to debate Lords amendments, prompting the "extremely disappointed" Lib Dem Munira Wilson to lament being given "such a small amount of time".

One of the amendments debated was doomed plans to ban under-16s from using social media. Labour's Sadik Al-Hassan has "received 1,309 emails from residents across North Somerset" supporting the move.

And, in a bid to win over sceptical colleagues, he said: "The consensus is clear: parents, teachers and almost everyone who works with young people want to see meaningful change."

This includes BBC Gladiator Steel, who is an ambassador for Smartphone Free Childhood. "I am sure no one wants to mess with him," Al-Hassan added. Now that would be a day to remember in the Commons!

## WEDNESDAY

In other news, Farage has gone to war with ... the polling firm set up by his new colleague!

Posting on X, the Reform leader complained that his party is "strong in all of the polls" except those produced by YouGov.

"They are using bizarre adjustments to suppress the true figures.

"No wonder their share price has fallen by over 80 per cent in recent

years!"

An odd move considering YouGov co-founder and former education secretary Nadhim Zahawi recently defected to Reform.

But the former pollster backed up his boss, writing on X: "It does feel like my old team are an outlier."

## THURSDAY

It is common practice for copies of key sector figures' speeches to be sent over to journalists in advance.

But ahead of Martyn Oliver's big ASCL conference speech tomorrow, Ofsted chose to only share \*extracts\* in advance.

Amid the hackneyed phrases – "the quiet curse of low expectations" – he defended the watchdog's new report cards, which have been described as "incredibly intense" by leaders.

"We are coming from a place where more than 90 per cent of schools were previously judged good or outstanding at their most recent inspection. That suggests less than 10 per cent of schools in the country need any improvement," Oliver said.

"But our job is to point out where expectations can and should be raised. The new report cards do this."

More schools, he added, are being graded 'needs attention' than "the old 'requires improvement' because we are raising standards. We are being more exacting. I make no apologies for that."

We suspect the speech will go down well in Liverpool!





## CHIEF EDUCATION OFFICER (SECONDARY)

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We believe every young person in Rochdale deserves an excellent education and a genuine opportunity to succeed. Altus Education Partnership is a values-driven trust committed to raising educational standards and widening opportunity across the borough. Inclusion sits at the heart of our work: we believe every young person, including those with additional needs, should be able to thrive. Today the Trust serves around 5,000 pupils and students across a growing family of academies, including the nationally recognised Rochdale Sixth Form College.

As Chief Education Officer (Secondary), you will provide strategic leadership across the Trust's secondary phase including Kingsway Park High School and Edgar Wood Academy, ensuring consistently high standards of curriculum, teaching, inclusion and outcomes.

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- Influence education across a growing and ambitious trust
- Work with a high-performing executive team
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## Headteacher

BDAT is looking to appoint an inspirational Headteacher for this exciting leadership role. We are seeking to appoint a strong and proven leader who will build on the strengths of our school so that it continues to provide a high quality education for all its students. Our goal is to transform the lives of our students, staff and community and to inspire each other to keep on developing and improving.

This post is a fantastic opportunity for an ambitious leader looking either to extend their experience of headship or to start their first headship in a highly supportive and rewarding environment.

We offer access to high quality personal and professional development for all our staff, with a great emphasis of supporting and developing the lives of everyone in the academy. You will also benefit from the close partnership working with the four other secondary academies within our multi-academy trust and the support of our colleagues in the Diocese of Leeds Education Team.

### We need from you

- A commitment to ensuring our children achieve their biggest and bravest ambitions.
- A love of teaching and learning.
- A passion for developing your team.
- Strong, innovative and strategic leadership and management.
- A firm commitment to achieving success through partnership and teamwork.
- Excellent interpersonal and communication skills.
- Drive, ambition and high expectations.
- Commitment to the vision and values of the school and trust.

### We can offer you

- A supportive and forward-thinking leadership team in an inclusive academy and trust.
- A stimulating, attractive and welcoming learning environment.
- An approach that supports and stimulates professional growth, with a bespoke CPD package.
- Cross-trust opportunities for collaboration and development.
- The opportunity to make a positive difference to the lives and careers of pupils and colleagues.
- A career in a forward thinking trust.