

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children, HC 365

Monday 13 January 2025

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Members present: Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Chair); Mr Clive Betts; Mr Luke Charters; Anna Dixon; Rachel Gilmour; Sarah Hall; Lloyd Hatton; Chris Kane; Rebecca Paul.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, National Audit Office, Emma Willson, Director, National Audit Office, and David Fairbrother, Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, were in attendance.

Questions 1 - 64

Witnesses

I: Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education; Juliet Chua CB, Director General for Schools, Department for Education; and Tony Foot, Director General for Strategy, Department for Education.

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General
Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children
(HC 125)

Examination of witnesses

Susan Acland-Hood, Juliet Chua and Tony Foot.

Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Monday 13 January 2025. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to perform well at school compared to their peers, with an impact on their future life chances. The Department for Education has an objective to reduce the attainment gap, and oversees a range of interventions to try to improve the attainment of disadvantaged children. While this picture was improving before the pandemic, recent data shows that the disadvantage gap is now wider than before the pandemic.

In 2023, the Committee warned of a lost decade for disadvantaged children following the pandemic. The NAO's latest Report indicates that there has been a lack of sustained progress on reducing the attainment gap, and limited understanding of where the Department's funding to support disadvantaged children is having its most important impact. Today, we will question witnesses from the Department for Education about progress on narrowing the attainment gap, how well spending focused on disadvantaged children is working, and how the Department is overseeing the sector to deliver its intervention.

We are very pleased today to welcome, from the Department for Education, Susan Acland-Hood, the Permanent Secretary. Welcome, Ms Acland-Hood. You have been here many times before, but we are always delighted to see you. Juliet Chua is Director General for Schools, and Tony Foot is Director General for Strategy.

I have a rather pleasant announcement to make before we get into the main session. Before we begin, a special congratulations to our regular attendee, the Treasury Officer of Accounts, who normally does not get much to say. Today, he is going to get a very warm accolade from all of us. David, many congratulations on your OBE. It is much deserved. You have been doing this job for a long time, and we send very warm congratulations to you.

David Fairbrother: Thank you very much, Sir Geoffrey. I hope that I continue to not say very much.

Chair: I have two questions on which I am not well briefed. Luke Charters, do you want to do your question at the top of the session please?

Q1 **Mr Charters:** Are you as alarmed as I am that children in schools are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

increasingly exposed to extreme and harmful content on social media such as Twitter and TikTok, including toxic misogyny, turning every device into a potential gateway for harm? How is your Department working with schools to better protect and safeguard our children?

Susan Acland-Hood: Thank you very much indeed. We are very concerned about the exposure of children to online harms. We think about our responsibility for keeping children safe as something that crosses the real world and the online world. You can see that in our guidance “Keeping children safe in education”, which is really the core document that we use to support schools and colleges with information on how to protect pupils and students. It contains key content on protecting them online as well as offline.

We have also worked very closely with colleagues across Government on children’s exposure outside school. As you will know, we issued guidance last year that prohibits the use of mobile phones in schools throughout the school day. That is not just in lesson time but in the time between lessons, including breaktimes and lunchtimes. It is for school leaders to work out exactly how to implement that, but we wanted to send a really strong and clear message that it was important for children to have some protected time in which they could concentrate and focus on learning. We recognised that there was a real challenge around not just that very harmful content that you described, but the risks of attention focus and distraction from mobile devices as well.

Q2 **Chair:** Ms Acland-Hood, you will recall that, when we had our hearing on franchised higher education providers, higher education institutions, particularly franchised providers, cannot register with the Office for Students. Given that this is an important check to protect taxpayers’ money, could you comment on that and whether you are prepared to ask universities to publish their franchise agreements?

Susan Acland-Hood: We have been moving quickly following on from that hearing. We have worked with the Office for Students, which published an insight brief in September 2024 that set out and described the formal investigations that it has opened into some university and college subcontractual arrangements. It said that its next cycle of quality assessments will focus particularly on the academic experiences of students studying through subcontractual arrangements.

It also said that it had imposed additional requirements on universities and colleges that subcontract to give extra transparency and information. It is taking steps to publish more data. Its student data record will expand to cover students studying under subcontractual arrangements, particularly where they are not included in data returns elsewhere.

The OFS is also making changes to the financial information that it collects from universities and colleges, including a new requirement to provide information about the financial flows for lead providers relating to their subcontractual arrangements. We also committed that we would



bring forward the next stage of our work on this through a consultation at the beginning of this year, and I can tell the Committee that we are on track to do that by the end of this month.

Q3 Chair: That is really helpful; thank you. The firm Ecctis was led by a UK envoy on ethics, and it made £13 million from not-for-profit visa services. Could you comment on that, please?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, and I might bring Tony in, because he has been working very closely on addressing this as well. As you say, Ecctis is a company that provides UK ENIC—National Information Centre—services. Essentially, that is a service to recognise qualifications across international boundaries and show what is equivalent to what. It is a service that we are required to have under our treaty obligations. It issues about 45,000 statements a year showing comparability. Ecctis also provides some related services for the Home Office.

In early 2023, as part of preparations for the re-procurement of the service, we identified some serious historic issues at Ecctis. The first thing to say is that it is of concern that we identified them as part of our preparations for re-procurement rather than through our management of the contract before that. That is something we have looked at very hard inside the Department.

Essentially, the services were being provided under a concession contract. There were no payments being made. Instead, the concession allowed Ecctis to provide the service and charge fees that were intended to be proportionate to the service being supplied. The contract said that any surplus that was made should be reinvested in the running of the service.

The substance of the issue we uncovered was that not all of the surpluses being made had been reinvested in the service, so it was breaking its contractual terms. As soon as we became aware of that, we took steps to intervene. We insisted that all of the surplus that should have been reinvested but had not was returned to the Department. We have then passed that on to the Exchequer as part of the consolidated fund extra receipts. We also insisted on profound leadership and governance change at Ecctis.

Ecctis repaid £13.64 million, so we are confident that there has been no loss to the taxpayer as a result of this, but we have carried out a really thorough review of how it came about that this was not identified sooner. We have also changed the basis of the contract so that, in future, the fees will come to the Department and there will be a payment made to the supplier through a monthly charge for the provision of the services. Effectively, we have removed the possibility of the fees being out of proportion to the cost of the service. We have also reviewed and strengthened our contract management arrangements to oversee the delivery of that service.



Q4 Chair: I do not know whether you want to say any more, Mr Foot. In particular, can you reassure the Committee that it would never be able to happen again as a result of the review that Ms Acland-Hood just referred to?

Tony Foot: Precisely as the Permanent Secretary said, we have fundamentally redesigned the contract so that it is, in future, no longer a concession contract, but a simple payment for services. The supplier is paid for the services delivered, but all fees are received by the Department for Education and by Government.

Q5 Chair: Thank you both for that clarification on Ecctis and on the franchised agreements with universities. We now come to the main session. The first question is from me. Why is the gap in education attainment between disadvantaged children and their peers so wide? Indeed, as I indicated in my opening remarks, it appears to be, if anything, widening still.

Susan Acland-Hood: As you said in your opening remarks, there is a persistent gap in performance between disadvantaged and less disadvantaged children, but it was closing in the years up to the pandemic. There was a little bit of slowing in the years immediately before the pandemic, but you can see a long period of sustained shrinking of that gap on quite a large number of measures. We look at it through a number of lenses.

It is a challenge that we see internationally—there is no country in the world that has entirely closed this gap. It opens very early. About 40% of the overall gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds and their peers has already emerged by the age of five, but it continues to widen, so you see that gap open by the age of five and then it opens further at each stage.

If you look at that picture before the pandemic, for example, you can see improvements both in the absolute standard of attainment of disadvantaged children and in the gap. In the early years, for example, we went from about 36% of FSM-eligible pupils getting a good level of development at age five in 2012-13, to 57% in 2018-19. Over the period, the gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils reduced from a bit over 19 percentage points to closer to 17 percentage points. You see a similar picture across phonics at key stage 2, at the end of primary school.

The gap then increased extremely significantly at all ages and key stages during the pandemic, and we have been working as hard as possible to try to close it again since then. If you look at both the absolute performance of disadvantaged pupils and the gap in the years since the pandemic, we are succeeding in closing that gap. It is true that it is still wider than it was before the pandemic, but it is closing.

The absolute performance of disadvantaged pupils is up, and the gap is down since 2021-22 in the phonics screening test, the key stage 1 reading assessment, the key stage 1 writing assessment, the key stage 1



HOUSE OF COMMONS

maths assessment, the key stage 2 measure of reading, writing and maths combined, the key stage 2 maths assessment, and the key stage 2 writing teacher assessment. It is not in reading, but that is because the performance of disadvantaged pupils in reading at key stage 2 alone did hold up during the pandemic and is at the same level as it was before the pandemic, but the performance of more advantaged pupils has gone up a bit. In the early years and foundation stage, the performance has gone up, but the gap has not closed as much.

In secondary, the picture is a bit more complicated. The disadvantage gap index is closing, and I can talk about that in a minute if that is helpful. It is another measure that we use. The percentage getting level 5 and above in English and maths was already above pre-pandemic levels in 2021-22, but advantaged students are doing even better, so the gap in absolute terms widened.

We have a better position on the gap closing at primary than we have at secondary. We know that when we close it at primary, we can expect to see that come through. When it widens, we have a lag effect through the rest of the system for a bit, and then, as we close it, we can improve it.

You asked about both why there is a gap and what works in closing it. Do you want me to stop, though, because I am conscious that I have talked a lot?

Q6 Chair: We will stop there and perhaps give Mr Foot a chance. What are you doing about publishing a plan that sets out how we will reduce the disadvantage gap as quickly as possible and the expected trajectory?

Tony Foot: As the Permanent Secretary says, that is the picture on attainment gaps recently. While they are closing, they are not closing as quickly as we would want them to. The forward plan is focused very heavily on the Government's opportunity mission. If it is helpful, I could describe briefly where we are up to with the opportunity mission and give the Committee that overall structure.

The opportunity mission is extremely helpful in thinking about attainment for disadvantaged children in a holistic way across the system. We are building it based on the evidence base of what works, and doing so in a holistic way across Government. We have brought in analysis on housing, child poverty and health, which are some of the wider conceptual factors that really matter for disadvantaged attainment.

We have also engaged extensively with children and young people on the multiple intersecting barriers that they face. From all that evidence, we have built a structure for the opportunity mission that goes through three sequential developmental phases, and then an underpinning foundation of family security.

To briefly give the Committee that structure, it starts with best start in life, so pre-birth through to child development at age five. We know that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that phase is particularly critical, because the gaps at that stage, once they have emerged, become very hard to remedy later. The Government have put real focus in the mission on making progress on that block.

Every child achieving and thriving through the school years is about attainment as well as tackling absence and improving young people's sense of belonging. Skills for opportunity and growth are about good progression routes through further and higher education and into good employment.

All those phases are underpinned by family security. The evidence tells us that the key barriers there are child poverty, particularly material deprivation, and then child safety and keeping children safe. That is the structure we are using.

Q7 Chair: That is really helpful from both of you. I am sure Committee members will want to question you on all aspects of what you have just said.

In order to let you make some opening remarks, Ms Chua, what have you learned about what works from the slight narrowing of the gap for KS2 in the last two years and KS4 in the last year? Tell us briefly, because we will come to different bits of that.

Juliet Chua: We look closely at the evidence base in terms of what really has made a difference, and at the use of evidence by schools to directly make sure that they are using the right type of mix of activities. At the heart of narrowing gaps is teacher quality. It is central to that. The work we are doing to improve the recruitment and retention of teachers is central, and I suspect we may want to talk a bit more about that as we move through the session.

We will, I suspect, also talk about the use by the Education Endowment Foundation of the evidence base on the types of intervention that have the most impact and the way in which schools are using it to target students and pupils who need the most support, as well as the nature of that evidence base and how it is particularly drawn together for allocation and implementation of the pupil premium, which targets disadvantaged pupils to have the most impact.

Chair: Those are really helpful opening remarks from the three of you, and we will want to press you on some of those issues.

Q8 Rachel Gilmour: In the past, the Department for Education has used several different measures to assess the attainment of disadvantaged children, but it goes without saying that there are weaknesses in its approach because things change. Your main measure for assessing progress—the disadvantage attainment gap index—compares national performance over time. It does not allow the DFE to fully understand how attainment changes, as this is assessed differently in the earlier education stages. Susan Acland-Hood, how confident are you that the disadvantage attainment index gap is still the best measure to assess



progress?

Susan Acland-Hood: As with nearly everything, it is always important to look at multiple measures, because it is very difficult to get a single measure that tells you everything. If the Committee will permit me, I will briefly explain how the disadvantage gap index works.

Chair: That would be really helpful, because this is an important question.

Susan Acland-Hood: It appears as a slightly random number, and it is a bit difficult to work out what it is. The intent of it is to be a measure that is helpful even if your assessment system or methodology changes a bit. It says, "Let us look at the outcomes of all the children who took a particular test, and let us rank them in order." Everybody's marks in the test get ranked in order. If all the advantaged children did better than all the disadvantaged children, that would be a gap of 10. That is the maximum inequality in the system. If all the disadvantaged and the advantaged children were perfectly spread out through the distribution, so that there was no impact of disadvantage on outcomes, that would be a gap of zero. That is the metric.

At the moment, at the end of primary school, the disadvantage gap index number is 3.13. It is nowhere near perfect inequality, but it is a way off perfect equality. The lower it gets, the closer you are, if you lined up every kid in rank order of their performance, to their disadvantage making no difference to their outcome.

The strength of it is that, even if you change the way that you do the test, that gap index still works. You can still rank all the outcomes and ask yourself the question. The weakness of it is that it is quite hard for people to understand, and it does not tell you in a lot of detail which bits different groups of people are finding more difficult, so you have to use it in combination with other measures that look at things like the percentage-point difference—is it the reading, the writing or the maths?

It is a really powerful and important measure, because it helps you to understand a set of things that are not always obvious from the percentage-point gap. Sometimes, those percentage-point movements are very dependent on the size of your starting number. In other words, you can look like you have a much bigger gap growing if you see quite small fluctuations in a small base number. I am not explaining that very well, but, statistically, it helps you to understand whether your percentage-point gaps are showing you genuinely growing inequality.

If it is helpful, in 2010-11, the equivalent of that 3.13 number that I described was 3.34. That 3.13 is the highest that it has been in the time series since 2010. The lowest that it got to in that time series was in 2017-18, when it was at 2.90.

Rachel Gilmour: So we are not talking about a huge fluctuation.



Susan Acland-Hood: No, but it is important to keep pushing it lower, because you are talking about the ranking of every pupil in the country, so even quite small movements affect the results of quite large numbers of people.

You can also use it to see more clearly than some of our other metrics where in the system the gap gets bigger. Again, it is 3.13 at the end of primary school. At GCSE, it is 3.92 at the moment. That is down from 2010-11, when it was 4.07, but 3.92 is, again, quite a lot higher than when it was at its lowest, which was in 2016-17, at 3.66.

Q9 **Rachel Gilmour:** To follow on from that, Juliet, I can understand the index, but how do you understand, monitor and factor into that local challenges and variations, given that it is a national measure not a regional measure?

Juliet Chua: As Susan said, we use a number of metrics to understand the performance of the system through data. That tells us the performance at a national level, but it also gives us a picture of individual school-level performance, which gives us a way to try to understand variation in how individual schools may be supporting the needs of their pupils with free school meals relative to their overall population.

We can use that to think about the sorts of support that we provide. For example, our new regional improvement for standards and excellence teams will, where schools are outliers, think more closely about the way in which they are tackling disadvantage in the context of their overall school performance.

Q10 **Mr Betts:** Moving on, are you happy that the inputs into the index have been consistent over time? You are talking about the differences over years. Are all the inputs into it consistent?

Susan Acland-Hood: There have been some changes in the testing methodologies but, as I say, because the index takes your performance and makes a ranking, it is much more stable against changes in assessment methodology than some of our other measures.

It is not the only thing that we look at. For example, if you look at the absolute key stage 2 attainment, there was a big change in the tests between 2014-15 and 2015-16, which means that you have quite a big discontinuity in the time series. To give you an example, when you look at reading, writing and maths combined, for all pupils, it was 63% in 2012-13, 67% in 2013-14 and 69% in 2014-15—so it was going up but in the same ballpark—and then there was a huge drop to 53% in 2015-16. That is not because the children in 2015-16 were terrible, but because the exam got a lot harder. That affects percentage-point differences between performance quite a lot.

When you look at the index, because you are ranking every pupil's achievement and seeing what the spread was within it, it is more resilient



HOUSE OF COMMONS

against those changes in assessment, which is why it is important to look at both things.

- Q11 **Mr Betts:** You mentioned other countries. Can you make realistic comparisons with other countries? Do they have similar information to yours that they are putting into their indices?

Susan Acland-Hood: They do not tend to use exactly the same indices, but we do have some quite good tools for comparing with other countries. The key thing is international studies, including those run by the OECD. Many of the international studies will look at performance by disadvantage.

The one that I would pick out from some of the recent studies is PISA, in which we saw some quite good performance by England. One of the most pleasing things about it was that, in the report on that, the OECD cited the UK as one of 10 highly equitable countries, meaning that the education system shows better results for disadvantaged people than you would expect.

It measures the impact of socioeconomic status on the variance in maths, science and reading performance. In all three, the variance in performance that could be explained by socioeconomic status was lower than the OECD average. Socioeconomic status has less impact on your performance in the UK than on average across the OECD.

It also looked at what it describes as the proportion of academically resilient pupils. It looked at those who are in the bottom quartile of socioeconomic background but perform at the very top end, and saw that we had above average proportions of academically resilient pupils in each of those three subjects.

- Q12 **Mr Betts:** Is academic resilience, or performance in exams, all that we should be measuring?

Susan Acland-Hood: No, absolutely not. It does matter, because it is quite highly correlated with lots of other outcomes, so it is still a good predictor of lots of positive life outcomes. We also look at things like wellbeing, on which there has been lots of attention and where we do not perform so well internationally overall, and progression into work.

- Q13 **Mr Betts:** Looking at progression at the other end of the scale, in early years, you clearly do not have that academic information there. You talked about kids aged five or younger coming in. They are all set up for life in terms of their educational achievements once they get to that stage, but you do not have a consistent way of monitoring what happens during that period, do you?

Susan Acland-Hood: At age five, we use something called the early years foundation stage profile, which looks at a number of domains. We know quite well how that correlates with expected later performance, so we can look at how children are coming to school at age five. It is usually



at the end of reception, so the profile is measured after most children have been in school through the reception year. We can track pretty well which bits of that are predictive of later success and, as I say, it explains about 40% of the gap that you later see at age 16.

Q14 **Mr Betts:** What examples do you look at at that age?

Susan Acland-Hood: The early years foundation stage profile looks at a number of domains of development. It will look at things like gross motor skills, such as walking, and fine motor skills, such as holding pens. It will look at your social and emotional development as well. Can you play with other children? It looks at foundational skills in reading, writing and number—so starting to do letter formation and counting.

Q15 **Mr Betts:** If you go to a headteacher in a primary school, they say that the two things that they notice straight away are potty training and being able to speak even a few words. The distinction there between kids of the same age is quite stark. Do you take on board those sorts of very basic things? That is what heads will tell you that they notice straight away.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, and the EYFSP covers those kinds of self-care and readiness things as well.

Q16 **Mr Betts:** Another big problem—there are probably differences here that need to be monitored—is absences from school, with disadvantaged children being absent or having severe absence more often than other kids. What is your explanation for that and what are your policies to try to tackle it?

Susan Acland-Hood: I will bring Tony in on this in a minute. You are absolutely right that we see more absence among children with disadvantaged backgrounds and those on free school meals. We saw higher absence rates for those children before the pandemic as well. Absence rates for all children increased during the pandemic in roughly the same proportion, but, because children on free school meals were absent more before the pandemic, it has meant that there is an even more acute challenge now. It is a critical issue in its own right, but it is also critical to the gaps in attainment.

Juliet Chua: When we look closely at attendance, we see broadly two related but quite distinct problems that we need to tackle in order to accelerate progress in improving attendance overall. One is the broad challenge, essentially, that we see 2.8 million children overall missing between 5% and 15% of their school sessions a year. We are beginning to see good improvement in terms of some reduced absence at primary, but we are not seeing the same rate of improvement for disadvantaged pupils, so we need to accelerate our in-school response. That is driven a lot by factors such as low-level anxiety, health worries, and maybe some change in attitudes in relation to attending school absolutely consistently.

The related but distinct challenge, as you described, is persistent and severe absence, where we see a concentration of pupils who are missing



HOUSE OF COMMONS

over 50% of school, with a higher proportion of those being disadvantaged pupils. We see the drivers to persistent absence taking account of some of what I have already described in terms of overall absence, but specifically also exacerbated by issues such as poor mental health and relationships, special educational needs, and some of those broader out-of-school factors that Tony described in relation to the opportunity mission that we also need to address. We need action to think about the relationship between homelessness, transport and churn in terms of life circumstances, and support more broadly in terms of mental health and school.

Mr Betts: For example, not being able to get a CAMHS appointment for a year when you get a referral.

Juliet Chua: Attendance is central to the opportunity mission. It is one of our key priority areas, and we will be tackling the in-school factors with the activity that we need to do in school, but also thinking about that broader out-of-school support.

Q17 **Mr Betts:** You have talked in general terms about children. Have you looked in particular at issues to do with gender and ethnicity, whether those are factors at play in how disadvantaged children perform in terms of school absences, and whether there are particular issues that should be addressed there?

Juliet Chua: Susan and Tony may also want to come in on this. We now have world-class data on attendance in a way that we did not historically have. Attendance is an international challenge, and the data that we now have enables us to look at a pupil level. When we look at patterns of attendance, it enables us to look at particular areas of drop-off in different year groups and different cohort effects, and at the pattern of different groups of students within that. It allows schools to start to more specifically target different patterns of gender related to mental health challenges. That does begin to give us more of a granular dataset against which to understand patterns of attendance.

Q18 **Mr Betts:** One of the issues often raised is about white working-class boys. By the time they get to 13, they have decided that school is not for them. They either do not want to be there and are not there, or they do not want to be there and generally do not learn. Do you have particular plans or policies in place to help schools to address that? It is not just leaving it up to schools to sort it out themselves, is it?

Juliet Chua: Our approach is very much in partnership with schools, in terms of the set of activities and tools that we need to put in place to really raise attendance, recognising also that that relationship with schools and the school belonging factor really matters. That is sometimes identified as a factor for boys and for different groups in terms of feeling that school is a place where they can achieve and thrive.

We issued new statutory guidance for schools overall, which is about taking a support-first approach, but very explicitly thinking about the role



of mentors. This is an area that we have expanded. A one-to-one relationship for those who we are seeing particularly persistent absence in can really help in building a stronger relationship to be able to return to school.

Mr Betts: It is also about the curriculum and making sure that it addresses what white working-class kids might want to aspire to.

Juliet Chua: We have started a curriculum and assessment review, looking closely at how we make sure that we have a world-class and really demanding curriculum with high expectations that works for all children. I would just pause in terms of whether we should have a different set of expectations for the curriculum for different groups of pupils within the system. We want to make sure that it is broad, balanced and really engaging. Some of that is in pedagogy as well as in the curriculum.

Q19 **Mr Betts:** Might it not be different for kids from different backgrounds and in different situations?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is important that the curriculum gives the opportunity for every child to find the things that excite and engage them, but also to persist in some of the things that do not initially, both because that is a life skill itself and because it is quite difficult to know what the things are that excite and engage you until you have been taught them for a bit.

This is the reason why we are hesitating. Chair, you asked me at the beginning what some of the components were that had caused some of that gap narrowing over the first part of the century. Trying to make sure that people were not, even with really good intentions, imposing a different set of expectations on children from disadvantaged backgrounds was an important component of that.

I recognise that, as you are saying, it is important that there is something in school that serves the interests of every child, but it is quite important to be able to take all children through a bit of persistence. This might not be Government policy, but being able to support children through persisting with things that are challenging and that they might not initially think are for them is, itself, valuable. Pedagogy is as important in that as curriculum. How you attach children to and interest them in things that they might not initially feel that attached to or interested in is as important as how you make sure that there is something that meets initial interest. We want a curriculum and pedagogy that can do both of those things.

Q20 **Chair:** It is very easy, Ms Acland-Hood, to drive us all into despair with all the detail and for us to think that it is all terrible. Going back to Mr Betts' question, if I take you to paragraph 1.9 on page 17 of the Report, it tells us: "International data, from 2022, assessing the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old pupils in maths, reading and science show that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

England performed significantly better compared with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.”

It also says that “England had a higher proportion than the OECD average of pupils who performed well academically despite their socio-economic background, with the United Kingdom’s education system being described as ‘highly equitable’.” There are pundits out there who say that, despite what we might think and the detailed questions that we are asking you, the system, compared to some of our international comparators, is not too bad.

Susan Acland-Hood: This is a classic case of where it is important to recognise the things that we have had some success in without allowing ourselves to, in any way, become complacent about it. I do think that we have had some successes. I have to say that those aspects of the OECD report were some of the most pleasing. The fact that it was not just an increase in overall attainment, but that it did make those reflections about equity, which is the academically resilient pupil group that I was describing earlier, is really pleasing.

We still have a really significant gap between children from different backgrounds, and I do not think that we should be satisfied with ourselves until we have closed it. That is a highly aspirational thing to say, because, as I said at the beginning, there is no country in the world that does not have a gap of some kind, but we just should not be satisfied.

We should also recognise that, as you go back into history, people’s perceptions of what was possible on this have changed really fundamentally. Again, I do not want to be polemical about it, but you read pamphlets from the 19th century describing why it was pointless to teach working-class children to write, which we might have moved beyond now, but we should keep aspiring for really high standards and really good performance for every child in the system.

Chair: That last sentence is something that we would all agree with, so thank you for that.

Q21 **Anna Dixon:** Welcome to the witnesses. Before I proceed with my questions, I need to declare a conflict of interest. I worked with Juliet when she was director of care and transformation at the Department of Health. For the record, I also have a personal association with Tony’s wife.

I am going to pick up some colleagues’ themes about measurement and getting into the evidence around what works. We see huge variation in some of the academic attainment data, even in local schools, for disadvantaged children, with some, including one that I will mention, which is Dixons Cottingley Academy, managing to get nearly 45% of disadvantaged children to grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs. I will not name others that have very much lower attainment rates. Clearly, that is a school that has done a great job of turnaround in terms



of school leadership—I have visited it. There are lots of factors that you can see.

The question is about how much we can trust these comparisons, given a couple of factors that are mentioned in the NAO Report and also in some of the evidence that we have received on two counts. One is who counts as disadvantaged children, with free school meals not being an entirely robust measure. We know that some of the most vulnerable children, as one of my headteachers said, either do not or find it difficult to apply for free school meals, so we are missing out there.

The other is in terms of the academic attainment measures. In paragraph 2.2 in the NAO Report, on the variation in entering exams, 8.3% of disadvantaged children are not entered for exams, whereas it is just 2.3% of those not known to be disadvantaged. I really do want to push as to whether these are sufficiently robust measures for us to know what is going on in terms of academic attainment for disadvantaged children. As it is a measurement question, I might address it to Mr Foot.

Tony Foot: That is a very good set of questions. I would start by saying that FSM is the single best measure that is available, and it is important to have a simple and understandable measure across the system, but it is absolutely right that that cannot be the limit of what we look at, because of some of the issues that you have described.

We look at FSM overall. We look at FSM6—those pupils who have been eligible for FSM in any one of the last six years. We look at persistent FSM, which really matters—where children have been persistently FSM for a long time. We then look at other markers of disadvantage, such as looked-after children. Again, the opportunity mission gives us the structure to do that consistently across each of the life phases.

The one other point where it is really important to think carefully about the metrics and measures we are using is how those are applied in the funding systems. We have done a lot of research in that space, which broadly says that you get the best correlation with need by taking individual pupil measures, particularly FSM6, putting them alongside area-based deprivation measures such as IDACI, and having a combination of those two things. We have built that into the schools national funding formula. We are increasingly building it into the early years national funding formula in the context of that evidence base.

Q22 Anna Dixon: I wanted to come on to that, in terms of how you therefore balance decisions about where to invest, given some of the emphasis here on academic attainment, and the point that you were making particularly in relation to the opportunity mission, which is on wider outcomes.

Again, some of the local schools that are in more area-based deprived areas are dealing every day with the impact of poverty. The Child Poverty Action Group highlighted just how much time and additional resource the schools are having to spend just on mitigating the impact of poverty.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Hungry children cannot learn, do not have clothes that are suitable to come to school, or cannot get to school—there are so many factors that are impacted by poverty.

How are you using these measures to balance investment decisions in terms of whether you are driving purely for academic attainment and closing the gap, or funding things that perhaps ameliorate the impacts of poverty more generally and based on wider outcomes for children?

Tony Foot: We try to look at it through both lenses, as you would expect, so we look at wider outcomes in their own terms but also, as the Permanent Secretary has described, the degree to which those wider outcomes reinforce and contribute to attainment.

I would give two examples of shifts in the funding systems and programmes that reflect the evidence base on some of those issues. One is the change that we have made to the early years pupil premium. What comes through well in the NAO Report is the difference in the level of the early years pupil premium in the early years compared to in primary school. This year, we have been able to increase the early years pupil premium by 45%, from £388 to £570, which reflects the very strong evidence base on the importance of tackling disadvantage through the early years phase, and before that key marker of development at age five.

The other area that I would highlight and pull out speaks very closely to your description of child poverty and children coming to school hungry. We are investing in school breakfasts. There is very good evidence of impact there. The EEF, for example, has evaluated school breakfast provision and found that, for children aged five to seven, that is the equivalent of two months of additional progress in maths, reading and writing. We also see in the evidence base the impact on attendance and behaviour, as well as on some of the wider outcomes and connections for children in those schools.

We are increasing the funding available for breakfast clubs, with an additional £30 million going in next year, which is both funding the existing 2,700 schools providing breakfasts and supporting an additional 750 early adopters that will guide the way towards national provision and rollout.

Q23 Anna Dixon: If I can jump ahead, because this builds off that, it sounds good that you are investing in an evidence-based approach in terms of the breakfast clubs. Looking at the EEF data, there is hugely positive evidence for a national tutoring programme, yet that is an area where you have stopped or withdrawn funding, or at least have left it to the discretion of schools. Certainly, the evidence from the Sutton Trust appears to be that many are having to, basically, divert funding that might have been intended for things like the national tutoring programme to just fill gaps in school budgets. How are you ameliorating and making sure that investment is going into the things for which there is good



evidence, such as the national tutoring programme?

Tony Foot: I might bring the specific question over to Juliet, if that is okay. For the stand-back, strategic architecture, there are areas in which we have programmes where we want to seed the system to demonstrate the value, and then to support schools into embedding that in their core practice. Juliet, do you want to pick up the national tutoring programme specifically?

Juliet Chua: The national tutoring programme was very deliberately designed as a time-limited, four-year programme to address some of the learning loss that we saw through the pandemic. I would note that when we set up programmes, in general, we try to reach a point where we can then mainstream that to build that evidence and practice in such a way that you do not, on a permanent basis, have multiple ringfenced programmes.

What the national tutoring programme did very clearly was to prioritise specific interventions through offering subsidised support for schools, drawing on the EEF evidence in terms of the role of one-to-one and group-level academic tuition through a range of models.

When we look at the evaluation, we see a growing understanding and recognition from school leaders in terms of the benefits of that, as well as, specifically in the evaluation, the learning gain that we saw particularly at key stage 2 for children through the programme.

As the programme came to an end in August, we set a very clear expectation of the role of the pupil premium, in that this is an intervention that schools can use their pupil premium funding for. We have updated our guidance and taken account of the evidence that came through from the NTP. I would also say that there is a legacy effect of having trained academic mentors through the NTP, and having raised that understanding and awareness of evidence among school leaders in terms of the role that tuition can play as part of the mix of interventions that schools can think about to raise attainment for their disadvantaged pupils.

Q24 **Anna Dixon:** I appreciate what you are saying about empowering local school leaders to make those decisions, but it is very clear from the evidence, with the cuts to school budgets, that the pupil premium is going just to fill gaps. Given that the evidence base is there for tutoring, and that the amount that went in was never as much for catch-up as was originally suggested, do you not think that there is a risk—in fact, I understand it is on your own risk register as red/amber—of not continuing to fund one of the most effective interventions to close the attainment gap, which is tutoring?

Juliet Chua: The risk very much identified that we needed to take steps to make very clear the case for tutoring as part of our continuing use of the pupil premium, and that there were actions that we could take to



continue to promote data as part of the overall promotion of the evidence base. We wanted, particularly with the use of pupil premium, to make sure that, in terms of the way in which schools are thinking about the choices available to them and really targeting interventions, particularly at students, this was something that we now have a really clear and well-established evidence base for.

Susan Acland-Hood: I will briefly read into the record that I am really proud of the national tutoring programme and really grateful to schools, teachers and particularly teaching assistants, many of whom were upskilled to deliver it. That upskilling does not go away, by the way. Once you have been trained to be an effective tutor through a programme, that is a sustained benefit. We said that we would deliver 5 million tutoring courses; we delivered 6.1 million tutoring courses over the four years of the programme.

The question you are asking is a good one and a hard one. We always have to look at the whole system. If we ringfenced funding for every programme that we had found to be effective over time, we would give schools a completely unmanageable system to run. It is always really easy to make the argument in respect of one programme but, if you look through the EEF toolkit at the number of things that have an evidence base and that make several months of progress, it is a very long list.

The mechanic that we use is the people premium, where we say to schools, "Here is some money that is dedicated to helping to make more progress for disadvantaged children. You should spend it on evidence-based interventions and you should use the EEF toolkit to help you to choose them." The EEF toolkit says, "You should spend about half your pupil premium on things that support high-quality teaching, because we know that is the thing that makes the greatest difference. You should spend about a quarter of it on individual-level, targeted, academic-focused interventions, of which tutoring is probably the single most obvious example. You should spend about a quarter of it on supporting wider need, including things such as attendance." So there is quite a clear guide there for schools. We then ask schools to write a plan and to show us what they are doing.

I understand your point about the risk of the diversion of funds into other things. It is true across the whole of schools' budgets that, in principle, they could be spending them very badly, but we try to make sure that we have an accountability system that supports schools in making good choices. Overall, we know that schools really value the ability to manage and run those budgets with some freedom. If you look at the evaluation of the NTP, it is incredibly strong. If you look at the overall evaluation of everything that we did on recovery, the single intervention that schools rate the highest was the recovery premium, which was no-strings-attached additional money. There are some things that teachers rate more highly than tutoring.



Q25 Anna Dixon: They like their freedom to make choices, and colleagues will be coming back to accountability, so I am not going to do that.

You raised the pupil premium. Given how important it is in the funding available and how much emphasis you are putting on it with regard to tackling disadvantage, why has it not kept up with inflation? The NAO Report suggests at paragraph 13 that the £2.8 billion on pupil premium is a 3% reduction in real-terms total spending.

Tony Foot: I recognise that picture and the description as set out in the NAO Report. It is worth stepping back and looking at disadvantage funding through the core of the national funding formula, alongside the pupil premium. Those two funding streams work in tandem. They do slightly different things. The pupil premium is targeted very specifically towards disadvantaged pupils, tied to evidence-based approaches on what works, alongside funding that is using disadvantage both for those pupils and as a proxy for wider need.

We have, through this period, increased the proportion of funding going through the deprivation factors in the national funding formula. That has gone from 8.8% in 2021 to 10.2% in 2024-25, and we have taken that choice alongside the rising complexity of SEND need in particular that has come through the system, where those factors act as a very effective proxy for SEND need that has come through the system and overlaps significantly with disadvantage.

Q26 Anna Dixon: I am just trying to understand this. You have increased the funding in the national funding formula at the same time but, as you say, they are quite different, in that the pupil premium is at least intended to more directly address disadvantage, where we have seen the gap get worse and attainment levels deteriorate for disadvantaged pupils, yet you are putting more money into the national funding formula. I just want to understand the mechanisms around more money in the national funding formula. Do you have a theory of change or a plan for how you anticipate those increases in funding to feed into improvements in the performance and attainment of disadvantaged pupils?

Tony Foot: To continue briefly on the balance between the NFF and the pupil premium, in a constrained budget we look across those things and think about the balance of funding between different routes. I am trying to describe the rationale for the increase in the factors in the disadvantaged elements of the NFF alongside that rising complexity of need in SEND, but, of course, we keep that balance under review and will continue to do so in future.

The other area that comes through in the NAO Report—which I have talked about previously, so I will be very brief—is the disjunct between the early years pupil premium and the primary pupil premium. There is a good evidence base for the increase in funding that we are taking forward in the early years pupil premium space.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Stepping back to your question about a theory of change, there is a complicated evidence base on the interaction between resources and attainment and school performance. The evidence does tell you that you see some correlation and impact, but you see a significantly larger correlation and impact for funding that is targeted towards disadvantaged pupils through the general funding system. We do see the evidence base that supports tilting funding in that direction, and then we use the accountability system, writ large, across school performance in total, to make sure we are driving performance for disadvantaged children as well as for the wider group of children.

- Q27 **Chair:** I want to pick up two things in Ms Dixon's questions. Let us stick with the pupil premium for a minute. We have had evidence from the Early Education and Childcare Coalition. Once you have given somebody an increase, there is always somebody who is asking for more, but, given that we all agree on the importance of early years interventions, I will put it to you to get your reaction. The evidence recommends that the Government "bring the early years pupil premium in line with the primary pupil premium, to support disadvantaged children to reach their Early Learning Goals". You have given a significant increase in the early years pupil premium, and we have had evidence that it should be extended to two-year-olds as well.

Susan Acland-Hood: It does cover two-year-olds. It covers anybody on an entitlement place.

- Q28 **Chair:** Do you think you now have the balance of funding about right for this early years pupil premium?

Tony Foot: We will continue to review that in future. It is important to say that, while there is a very strong evidence base on the early years pupil premium and the investment in disadvantaged children in the early years, you do have to make sure that increases in funding go alongside the evidence base on how that funding can be spent effectively.

It is fair to say that, while we have a very developed evidence base in the schools phase, underpinned by the EEF, we have some evidence in the early years phase, and increasing evidence of pedagogical interventions that work through our stronger practice hubs and that work, but it is still developing, so matching increases in funding with the developing evidence base is important.

- Q29 **Chair:** We were coming on to the national tutoring programme later, but, so that we complete it now, given that you are not going to provide any subsidy for it this year, paragraph 3.12 on page 43 of the NAO Report found that "only 15% of school leaders surveyed said they would continue to provide tutoring after the NTP ends, with 48% being unsure, and 27% saying they would not." Given that you are not going to fund it, it seems this successful programme is likely to run considerably downhill. Why have you declined to fund it when it was so successful?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Susan Acland-Hood: As I say, like lots of the things that we do it was designed on the basis that you would tie funding to it for a period. Effectively, we have been reducing the co-funding rate over the four years of the programme, so it has come down. We would then mainstream it once we had established its value. You would expect to see some drop-off between something that is, effectively, a free good and something where people have to make a decision within their budget about whether it is worth while.

The other way of reading those figures is that there are a really significant number of heads who intend to continue it, even though we are not funding it. The “do not know” group is quite large and, depending on when you ask the question, that will be a little bit because school budgets for next year will only relatively recently have started to become clear to heads.

The principle that we want schools to look at the evidence and their pupils, and at what they can spend the money on that is going to make the most difference, is right. I do not think we would say that the evidence base for NTP is so strong that it is literally, always and everywhere, the right thing to do for every disadvantaged pupil.

We are going to keep tracking it, though, so we will keep collecting the data and keep that under review. We will also continue to communicate about the impact. There are now a lot of things in the system that are not individually funded, but where the data and evidence is so strong that they are extremely widely used, using schools’ own funding. We have track records in other areas of being able to do that embedding.

Q30 **Chair:** I take that reassurance, but, talking to some of my own school heads, it was quite difficult to recruit or find these either existing teachers who were prepared to do the extra work, or different people to provide the national tutoring programme. I am wondering whether that is one of the reasons why you are not funding it. Some schools were able to do it and others were not; therefore, you are leaving the discretion to the school. If you do that, I am not sure that the schools that perhaps need it most will be the ones that will do it.

Susan Acland-Hood: There is always a risk, when you give more freedom, that the people who make the greatest use of the freedom are those who are already doing well. That is something we always have to look at in the system. We also have a lot of work going on to strengthen our ability to support schools that are not performing as well as others—for example, through our RISE teams, which will work with a larger group of schools than has been possible in the past, where performance is challenging or where Ofsted raises concerns.

Alongside that, there is a bit more architecture going in, so that where schools are struggling, we can get alongside and support them. That will not always be with spending your people premium on NTP; it will be with the thing that the school is finding challenging or is impeding its



performance. Again, it allows us to get alongside where there may be challenges.

Chair: That is reassuring. I should have said at the beginning that we have established a new procedure, whereby, after an hour of the public hearing, we have a five-minute break. I will tell you when we are having it and when we need to be back, so that it does not prolong the hearing too much.

Q31 **Rachel Gilmour:** Referring to figure 5 on page 22 and figure 6 on page 25 of the Report, can you tell me something that, possibly because I am not as intelligent as you, is not obvious to me? Why have you not brought departmental work to support disadvantaged children together into a clear strategy or approach? I have to say that we find at almost every one of these hearings that there seems to be a dearth of strategy and of data. I do not want you to fall into that category, so I would like to know why there is not a clear strategy or approach.

Susan Acland-Hood: I normally remember to start these hearings by saying that I am grateful to the NAO for the work it has done, and we are. This issue is important. This is one of the areas where I do not think I quite agree with the NAO's analysis that there is not a strategy.

What it is saying is that we have not articulated across literally all of the Department's business how every bit of it fits together. Again, I will turn to Tony, who can talk about how we organise ourselves in this, but the opportunity mission is fundamentally how we are organising all the work of the Department. It has closing attainment gaps right at its heart. Essentially, it is the organising principle for how we are doing pretty much everything we do. We set that out at a headline level in the Plan for Change document. Internally, we feel as though we do have a clear organising principle around this.

Tony Foot: The NAO Report rightly reflects the fact that the outcomes of disadvantaged children are embedded in each group in the Department, and that is the right approach. We want outcomes for disadvantaged children to be core to all policy and strategy in each area. Of course, as the report points out, that means it is really important to also have mechanisms for looking across the board to understand the consistency.

Rachel Gilmour: To me, "core" means silo.

Tony Foot: It definitely should not be that. We also need to have those mechanisms for bringing together, trade-offs and prioritisation, in order to understand the connections and the consistencies. As the Permanent Secretary says, we have done a lot of that.

I chair a performance and risk committee across the Department as a whole that brings all those groups together. We consistently look at the data and information that comes through. We feed that into the Department's business planning processes, to make sure that the



variations we see in performance and attainment in the system get reflected in resource allocation decisions.

It is also fair to say that the opportunity mission helps us to take that to another level, because it gives us a clear organising structure that puts all life phases together in one framework and allows us to look at progression for disadvantaged children consistently through those frameworks. We are already seeing the benefits of that in terms of prioritisation. The Government's Plan for Change has explicitly focused on the best start in life. The development at age five, in the context of stepping back and looking across the evidence base that tells us that, is where we will see particular returns for improvements in disadvantaged attainment. The mechanisms are there. The opportunity mission lets us take that to another level.

Q32 Rachel Gilmour: My second and third questions really fall out of that. How do you decide the balance of investment across all your interventions, and do you consider any trade-offs? I hope the answer to that is no. How confident are you that DFE teams equally prioritise support for disadvantaged children and work together? Those two questions go back to the big one at the beginning. I have worked as a head of strategy elsewhere, and this opportunity mission just does not really work for me without that extra bit of detail.

Tony Foot: Shall I describe a bit more how we take the decisions on funding across the Department? It is right to say there is not a perfectly scientific rationale for the split of funding. In a funding system you always have to start from where you are, and you need to do that for two reasons. The first is to make sure that changes are manageable for providers and transitioned over time. The second is, as I described earlier, that funding increases are aligned to the provider's ability to spend money effectively.

That said, the evidence does give us a clear direction of travel in two respects. The first is generally increasing the proportion of funding that is targeted towards disadvantage, with the evidence base that that has a greater marginal impact on outcomes. You can see that in many of our funding decisions and the increase in the NFF deprivation factors in particular.

The second, as I have described already, is the weighting of funding towards early years, with those big increases in the early years pupil premium in particular—both the increase in entitlement towards under-two-year-olds and the 45% increase going into next year. We are strategically stepping back and pushing more of our pounds and money into that space, reflecting the evidence base of return.

Q33 Rachel Gilmour: I know that historically—I am talking back to the beginning of the century, which makes me sound ancient—the Labour Government did exactly the same with their early years. They put money in there, and then where it dropped off and where the working-class



white boys Mr Betts identified fell through the gap was when they got to year 7 in the secondary school system.

I know the Jesuit quote: "Give me a boy until he is 7 and he is mine for life". I get that, in terms of funding and aspiration, you stick it through the very early years, but I would be disappointed to think that there was not an aspiration—you used the word "aspiration" before, which I like—to keep it going all the way through, when your data shows you that some pupils, particularly working-class white boys, are more likely to fall off.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. You asked about trade-offs; unless somebody gives me unlimited funding, which would be wonderful, there will always be some trade-offs. As we take funding decisions, we look at the evidence base and the marginal return, but we also recognise that if we were to pivot all our funding into the early years we would not be doing right as you go through.

As Tony has described, when it comes to the strategic approach to the funding of disadvantage, there are two pillars. First, we want to be tilting funding towards disadvantage, and increasingly tilting funding towards disadvantage at every stage of the system. Secondly, if there is a trade-off between a marginal pound and if we can put it in a bit earlier, we will, but that does not mean we put all of it in earlier. We need to be able to spread it across the life course. Those are the two principles that we use.

Chair: I am now going to call a short break for about five minutes.

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

Q34 **Anna Dixon:** I want to come to cross-Government working, recognising that when the NAO Report was being prepared we did not have the opportunity mission, and you have already talked a little about that. Obviously it is vital for disadvantaged children that schools, and indeed the DFE, work very closely with other Government Departments, not least the Department of Health and Social Care. We have talked a little about the importance of SEND; our Committee has looked at that previously with you, as well as other things around early language, early developmental and so on, but also with DEFRA around food and food standards, and with MHCLG around housing. How do you work to address all these different factors that may be beyond your control? Given that you have mentioned the opportunity mission, how will that either change or improve your ability to work cross-Government?

Susan Acland-Hood: Cross-Government work is absolutely essential to the outcomes of all children, but disadvantaged children in particular. In addition to the partnerships that you named, I would add as one of our really critical partnerships our partnership with DWP, including on the child poverty taskforce. A lot of our work, both on programmes like holiday activities and food, and on understanding the experience of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

families in poverty, is done in incredibly close partnership with DWP colleagues.

I am going to turn to Tony, because the opportunity mission is a really important part of the answer to this question. We have always sought to work in close partnership with other Departments. Mission-led government overall and the opportunity mission in particular have given an extra impetus to that, and also an additional mechanism and lever that we can use.

Again, the challenge does not typically tend to be that nobody is talking to each other; it tends to be that individual Departments will have their own individual hierarchy of priorities. If the thing you are trying to do is high on your priority list and low on theirs, it can be challenging. What the mission structure does is to say, "This is the priority we are collectively giving to this overall across Government." That is already helping us to bring people together effectively. Tony, do you want to talk a bit about that?

Tony Foot: Perhaps I will give a couple of specific examples of areas where this approach is already helping and showing its value. Child poverty and the child poverty taskforce is absolutely one of them. We are working hand in glove with DWP through the child poverty taskforce, chaired jointly by the DFE Secretary of State and the DWP Secretary of State, with officials from both sides seconded into the child poverty unit. That is really helping, as the child poverty taskforce does its work across increasing incomes, reducing costs, financial resilience and better local support, particularly in areas like childcare, where we are able to think holistically about the contribution that childcare can make to improving access to services and to child development, but also to supporting parents into work and supporting parents to increase their working hours. I would call that out as a particularly good example so far.

You mentioned it briefly in your introduction, but the other area I would call out in particular is very close working with DHSC on the "best start for life" element of the mission, where the early child development on health alongside educational development is critical. We have just made a co-ordinated announcement on family hub support, alongside start for life funding from DFE and DHSC together, which is targeted on the full range of interventions, from home learning environment and parenting support through to perinatal mental health and some of those wider health drivers that are critical as well. I would highlight those two areas as practical examples.

Q35 **Anna Dixon:** From my work on health inequalities I know there is a win-win there, in a sense. Obviously, from the Marmot work on health inequalities, we know those early years are drivers of lifelong health inequalities, as well as the inequalities that we are concerned with today in education. I can see that for the DHSC it would be a shared priority. As I suppose you were alluding to, are there some areas of Government



where what is important for you is not as important for them?

Tony Foot: As the Permanent Secretary says, having those single shared priorities helps to evaluate programmes on a shared basis. That does of course prompt hard conversations, and we are having those in the opportunity mission board and in the mission board across Government, but you do have an objective basis to evaluate programmes in the context of contributions towards that ultimate goal.

The other area where we would like to go further is on joining up the data and the underpinning information. We have made some progress on that but there is definitely a lot more to do, and the more we can get into the space of shared data between education, health, justice and so on, the more we are able to evaluate the contribution to those outcomes on an objective basis. I would pick that out as a particular continued challenge towards improved cross-Government working.

Q36 **Anna Dixon:** What about shared evaluation? Again, we have spoken already at some length and the Education Endowment Foundation has been mentioned a number of times. It was set up as a What Works centre. I probably should have declared an interest: I led another What Works centre, the Centre for Ageing Better. I see that you have recently decided to provide further funding up to 2032. One assumes you see that as very good value for money in providing an evidence base, not only to yourselves at the Department but to schools. Do you think that is sufficient to provide an evidence base, not only for your decision making as a Department but for that joint decision making with other Departments to support the opportunity mission? I am interested in how you have used the evidence to date. Juliet, perhaps you want to comment on how schools are using it, while Tony can comment on the future and whether that is going to be sufficient to meet future needs.

Tony Foot: I will say a few things about that and then Juliet can come in on the specifics. It is critically important and has huge value. Of course, it is not sufficient in its own right. We are pushing forward in areas to widen the evidence base further. We are obviously working with a wider range of What Works centres—not just the EEF but the Centre for Children and Families, the Youth Endowment Fund, the Youth Futures Foundation and more widely.

We began this work in 2024 but we are accelerating it further with the opportunity mission, but we are also now publishing areas of research interest externally. We are setting out the areas of collective research interest across departmental policy and delivery objectives where we want to leverage that wider academic and third-sector input. We will be doing an update to that in 2025 with an opportunity mission focus and lens. That has been welcomed by academics so far. It really helps with the engagement.

We are also now running a series of roundtables that bring experts together on particular issues, both to look at the existing evidence base



and to discuss gaps and where they need to be filled. We have done those recently on thriving in schools, on quality early education alongside health, and then, in future, we will look at attendance and the home learning environment, which is an area of continuing development in the research and the evidence base.

Q37 Anna Dixon: Given the importance of absence, as we heard earlier, any evidence base about what works to prevent persistent absence and to re-engage particularly young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in education, particularly in secondary schools, certainly seems like a gap.

Juliet Chua: One of the really important shifts we see is the increasing adoption of the use of evidence-led practice within the education system. It is an area that we want to continue to drive really hard at and make sure we have a rigorous evidence-based approach to the way we think about schools' policy across the board.

The EEF is both about research and about dissemination. It is about essentially making sure that you are testing pedagogical interventions, but you are also then thinking really carefully about the way schools can adopt them, their relative value for money, and the time and value for money in terms of how they work. We are now at a point where over half of schools in England have participated in a trial, which is quite a significant shift in terms of actually being part of the evidence-building process.

Through our omnibus survey we closely monitor how school leaders are using the evidence base, and we want to see that continue to grow. In the most recent survey, 69% of school leaders say they are using the EEF resources. We actually think that is probably an underestimate, because when we look at the individual statements we see very clear reference back to the EEF evidence base and to the way that is informing decisions about specific interventions. That is an area that we want to keep going further on. The EEF itself is also deeply interested in how we make sure that schools have access to the latest in terms of what works, but also make it as easy as possible for that to be disseminated, adopted and brought into classroom practice.

Q38 Anna Dixon: Do you have a sense of how much of the research is focused specifically on what works for disadvantaged children?

Juliet Chua: At the heart of the EEF's mission, as an organisation, is a particular focus on disadvantage. In some areas of the research it is really clear that what works for disadvantaged pupils works well for all pupils, such as good-quality teaching and a focus on learning. We talked earlier about tutoring, which has particular benefits for disadvantaged pupils, although the evidence obviously extends for all pupils. There is a concentration of benefit for disadvantage but, as I say, the EEF very deliberately has at the heart of its mission to make sure that the research base supports improved attainment and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.



Q39 Anna Dixon: There is one other question from me, which is about the education investment areas. I was wondering about the way you work with them, and you also mentioned earlier the expanded RISE teams. The EEF obviously produces evidence, but what some areas and schools need is support. It is all very well reading a nice report telling you what you should be doing, but when you are actually up against it and really struggling that is really difficult, particularly if you have high levels of poverty among the children you are serving. Can you say a little bit more about the selection of the education investment areas? Is that something you are going to continue with? How have you assessed the effectiveness of the funding for those specific local areas?

Susan Acland-Hood: Priority education investment areas was something established under the previous Government. It was focused on 24 local authorities with high levels of disadvantage and low levels of attainment. It looked at the combination. An element of it was the local needs fund—that element ends this financial year—which was focused on small amounts of flexible funding, but it also tilted a set of other interventions into those areas.

For example, more schools in the PEIAs are eligible for their teachers to receive the targeted retention incentive than in other areas. The targeted retention incentive goes to teachers in shortage subjects who are teaching in schools with higher levels of deprivation, but you also get more schools and higher levels of payment if you are in one of the PEIAs, because we know there is a concentration effect. We also tilted programmes like family hubs. When we were looking at the placement of family hubs we looked at the PEIA, so we used them as a way of tilting investment.

The RISE teams, which I talked about, are slightly different, in the sense that there will be RISE teams covering every area. They will focus on a group of schools. Again, for some time we have had the ability to intervene, principally structurally, in schools where Ofsted identified serious problems. What we have not had to the same degree is the ability to get alongside and support schools that either looked as though they were about to get into difficulties or were in difficulty but not in such severe difficulty that it was reasonable to structurally change the whole of their leadership and governance.

The RISE teams are about creating teams, bringing together civil servants and expert advisers who will be seconded from the system themselves—it is a system-helping-system mechanic as well—to support those schools and help them to improve earlier than we would be able to if we were waiting for a structural intervention in every case. We will still intervene structurally if there is a school where leadership and management cannot manage its own improvement, but there is a group for which, as you say, there is a need for more active support. We think that will give faster improvement in a wider range of schools. That is targeted more on schools with poor performance. Again, we will look at



performance for different pupil groups and at Ofsted's assessment of schools as we do that, and there will be more information coming out about the RISE teams soon.

Juliet Chua: Given we want to drive high and rising standards, that mechanism of regional support is both through the targeted approach and through the universal approach of highlighting really excellent practice and being able to transmit that, which then promotes more innovation in the system. That support is important for the reasons Susan set out: getting the right type of targeted package of support for an individual school that reflects its individual circumstances. Once we have the report card from working with Ofsted, that will also provide a vehicle for being able to highlight really good practice in a local area across the region, which will then promote better outcomes for all. But really it is that sense of driving high and rising standards in each area.

Q40 **Anna Dixon:** For clarification, whose responsibility is it to capture that learning and spread good practice? Is it Ofsted's?

Juliet Chua: Ofsted will act as a diagnostic for the system as it looks at individual schools, and that will identify, as it inspects individual schools, both areas that are strong and areas for improvement. The system will then be able to use that.

Q41 **Anna Dixon:** But it does not just happen. Again, if you are a school that is struggling, you do not just happen to notice, "Oh, that school has performed well. I will go off and go on a visit." Whose responsibility is it to spread good practice, capture and share?

Juliet Chua: The RISE teams are made up of civil servants and advisers who come with a specific background in terms of system improvement. They will work with that school to make sure it has a strong package of targeted support that draws on good practice.

Susan Acland-Hood: We should not forget that there will continue to be an incredibly important role for responsible bodies in the system—for academy trusts where schools are in trusts and for local authorities where schools are maintained by the local authority. It is also a key responsibility of those bodies to spread good practice across the system, both within their trust and to look for good practice outside. There is quite a lot of system capacity at the trust level and in local authorities that can continue to be used. The RISE teams will work with that capacity rather than replacing it or substituting for it, and that is important as well.

Q42 **Anna Dixon:** But you are funding the education investment areas, so are you capturing and spreading good practice from the education investment areas, which is specifically where deprived funding is going in?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

Anna Dixon: That sits with you.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

- Q43 **Anna Dixon:** In terms of all this extra money that is going in, you mentioned it being on two metrics, one of those being disadvantage and the other being attainment. Is that using free school meals again for the education investment areas getting money? Is that the measure of disadvantage, or is it something else?

Susan Acland-Hood: I would have to check back and write to the Committee on that. I am absolutely sure that FSM will be one of the measures we have used, but I would need to check whether we also use others.

Anna Dixon: It was just a point that colleagues were making about auto-enrolment, and about the problems of some areas having higher and others having lower FSM data. Whoever raised it might want to raise it, Chair.

Chair: It would be helpful if you could clarify that issue, Ms Acland-Hood.

- Q44 **Mr Charters:** On FSM, we know that about 20 local authorities have implemented an opt-out system. I wondered whether you have an evidence base for the benefits of that and whether, in particular, that was skewing or favouring certain areas. In general, do you have a business case that it should be a national system of opt-out in terms of FSM auto-enrolment?

Tony Foot: We continue to watch and to review the evidence base and the trials. I recognise the issue you are describing and the under-claiming of FSM. Our major focus there is in trying to promote and increase the level of take-up, and to make that as easy and simple as possible—for example, by reforming the eligibility-checking service that makes it as easy as possible for local authorities and parents to understand their entitlements, and to support schools with supporting parents to claim. We will continue to watch the pilots in those areas, but at the moment our focus is on improving the take-up rates and making that as easy as possible for parents and for families.

- Q45 **Mr Charters:** If it is necessary, should we have a national system whereby all local authorities would be required to have an opt-out system?

Tony Foot: We will watch the evidence base of pilots that are happening and where that is being tried in parts of the country, but our focus at the moment is on claiming through the existing system.

- Q46 **Mr Betts:** I want to come back to the issue of early years and two aspects of it. The first is the financial help for disadvantaged children in early years. The pupil premium—one of the main measures of help—for early years pupils is £1,000 less than it is for primary school pupils. Given what you said about the fact that kids who begin to slip back are at a lower level of attainment in early years and that carries on throughout



their school life, why is the pupil premium not at the same level for early years as it is for primary school pupils?

Susan Acland-Hood: As we mentioned earlier, we have increased the early years pupil premium rates this year by 45%. You are right that it is still significantly lower than the primary rate, but it is significantly higher than it was last year. As Tony described earlier, that is partly about trying to make sure that, as we increase the rate, we do it in a way that does not cause instability in the system.

You could do that by switching money from general formula factors in the early years to disadvantage. If you do that to a really high degree without putting a lot of extra money in—again, the amount of total additional extra money available is, as everyone has probably noticed, a bit constrained at the moment—and you did it by switching, you would cause a lot of turbulence in the system. We went as far as we could by trying to find some extra money to put in and by managing the amount of turbulence we thought the system could manage.

As Tony said, we want the early years pupil premium to be, as the school one is, tied to the use of really well-evidenced practice. You have to increase it to a rate that is consistent with the ability of people to shift their practice. Strategically, you are absolutely right that there is a good case for continuing to increase it. There is a better case for continuing to increase it over time than for increasing it in one single step to be as high as the primary pupil premium. That will also result in it being better spent.

Q47 Mr Betts: To benefit, disadvantaged kids actually have to be in early years provision in the first place, yet the incentives for children of parents who are working to go into the early years system are not necessarily the same as those for children whose parents are unemployed. Does that create an additional disadvantage for some kids in the system?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is true that the new entitlements are focused on working families. The entitlements we have put in from nine months are focused on working families, but we do have a universal 15-hour entitlement for all three and four-year-olds. We have seen the take-up of that increase. It was always quite strong, but it has increased over time as well. We also have a disadvantaged two-year-old entitlement, which is focused on what we know. There are two aims of the childcare policy. One is around childcare development and school readiness, and the other is around enabling parents to work. The combined package of the entitlement seeks to meet both of those aims.

The other piece of this is investment in supporting parents to support their own children at home. If you have parents who are not working, particularly with children under two, it is possible, looking at the evidence base, to ask really serious questions about whether the best thing is to support those parents in being able to use formal childcare or whether you want to support them in enriching the home learning environment



HOUSE OF COMMONS

with their own children and supporting them. That is what our family hubs programme does, and that is targeted in disadvantaged areas. It is a balanced picture.

The other concern that has been raised, which we took very seriously, was the risk that, with an increase in working parent entitlements for nine-month-olds, one-year-olds and two-year-olds, there was a bit of a risk that you might have seen some settings focusing their places more on those working parents and less on the disadvantaged two-year-olds. That is one of the many reasons for the increase in the early years pupil premium, which is there both to support child development and to create a quite strong incentive for settings, where they can, to give places to children who are disadvantaged, because they get more money per head for them through the pupil premium.

Q48 Mr Betts: You mentioned family hubs. There is an attempt to look at the child's needs and development in the round, and to engage other Departments in that as well. Have you done any analysis of whether any of these initiatives are as effective as Sure Start in delivering for children from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is quite hard to assess early years initiatives against Sure Start when they are delivering now, because the impact shows over quite a long period. Our best evidence on the Sure Start impact is coming through significantly after the event, but we have used a lot of the Sure Start evidence base in designing the family hubs programme, particularly the evidence that shows that the early stages of Sure Start, which were more embedded in community, gave more flexibility to the Sure Start local programme and were more focused in disadvantaged areas, were more effective and had stronger returns than the later phases when it became more universal. The family hubs targeting does link back to that evidence base on Sure Start. Again, a lot of the work on the individual components that were affected is reflected in the work on family hubs and in some of our early years practice work.

Q49 Mr Betts: Is the intention to look at the benefits of family hubs as a reason or possibility to expand that approach to more areas and more children?

Susan Acland-Hood: There is a lot of enthusiasm for the family hubs approach. There would be a lot of interest in expanding it. We will look at that with Ministers against all the other things that we would like to be able to develop and expand.

Q50 Mr Betts: Without asking you to do a policy analysis, which I appreciate is not your responsibility, in terms of the analysis you are doing about the effectiveness of these programmes, are family hubs coming out at the top of what is effective?

Susan Acland-Hood: They are still relatively new. There is some good emerging early evidence, but it is still early stages. That is all I can say on the family hubs programme, because it is still relatively new.



Tony Foot: To amplify it a little bit further, we are finding a lot on the Sure Start programme from the IFS research and so on that has come out recently. That shows some of the impacts on GCSE attainment and on SEND, and some of the features that the Permanent Secretary has described. It is early on family hubs at this point, but we are seeing some of the early evidence on the early markers, particularly the early years foundation stage profile. Doncaster, which has quite a developed family hub model, is seeing 1.06 times improvement in children reaching the early years foundation stage profile, so we are beginning to see that evidence flow through into concrete results at age five.

Q51 **Chair:** Your risk register says that recruiting and retaining enough high-quality teachers is a major risk, and that you have evidence supporting the importance of teacher quality and teacher development in pupil outcomes. I have some questions on teacher recruitment and retention. Teach First, which my daughter was part of at one point, made a number of suggestions. I would like to get your reactions to some of the suggestions given in evidence to us. One is to continue the high-potential initial teacher training route to proactively recruit and place high-quality teachers in schools with the highest levels of need. Is that something you agree with?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

Chair: That is great. You should reinstate salary levels for teacher trainees, taking employment-based routes to 2010 levels, and implement flexible working entitlement for all teachers.

Susan Acland-Hood: That links quite closely to the overall position on teacher pay. I will say a couple of things and then I will hand over to Juliet, who leads on this. Colleagues on the Committee will have seen that we accepted the School Teachers' Review Body recommendation of a 5.5% pay award for teachers and leaders in maintained schools from this September. That means that many teachers in schools have had a 17% pay increase over the last three years. We continue to invest heavily in teachers' pay.

We have also been investing really heavily in teacher development, because we know that the quality of teachers is critical, and also that we can support teachers. Both the reform of initial teacher training programmes and the work on the early career framework, which is effectively replacing what used to be a single year of support once you were qualified with two years of support, including mentoring, has been really important.

We have also invested in targeted payments, both bursary and scholarship payments for those in training in shortage subjects and the targeted retention incentive payments I spoke about earlier, which reach £6,000 a year on top of your base salary for teachers in shortage subjects. Those payments are higher if you work in schools in more disadvantaged areas. That is both about recruiting more teachers and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about keeping more teachers in the profession, which is as important as recruiting more when we think about teacher supply. It is also about incentivising teachers to work in schools in more disadvantaged areas, because we know that more disadvantaged schools do have greater challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers, including in making sure they have the right number of subject specialists. We are really focused on that and we will continue to be.

As you know, the Government set a target for an additional 6,500 teachers, and all these mechanisms will be incredibly important in meeting that target. We are also absolutely determined to hit the target and hit the point of the target; in other words, we are really focused on making sure that those teachers are in subjects in phases where we most need them. As the demographic pressure comes out of primary school into secondary, and increasingly into post-16, we are looking really hard at where the pupil number growth is and where the teachers are needed.

Q52 Chair: Disadvantaged areas find it more difficult to recruit teachers with degrees, and teachers with degrees can beneficially affect the outcomes. What more can you do to make it easier for disadvantaged areas to recruit those teachers?

Susan Acland-Hood: The vast, vast majority of teachers have degrees. The challenge is recruiting specialists in shortage areas, particularly in physics and computing, for example. We are doing a number of things. The high-potential initial teacher training programme, which was referred to, is what Teach First delivers. HPITT is a terrible acronym and it is an incredibly long name; Teach First is much easier to say and understand. That programme was designed as a distinct route into teaching specifically for schools in disadvantaged areas, and specifically designed to help them to recruit really skilled and high-potential graduates.

We also have the work on the targeted recruitment incentive. If you work in a school that is in the top third of schools by the number of kids with pupil premium—the top third of deprived schools—and you are in an educational investment area, then your teachers attract £6,000 in retention premium. That steps down through levels of deprivation. There is a payment for anyone working in the top half of schools in deprivation, and that is designed to try to allow those schools both to retain and to recruit more teachers in those shortage subjects.

Juliet Chua: At the heart of this conversation is that high-quality teaching is a critical in-school factor and it makes a profound difference. I want to recognise the work of teachers and school leaders across the system in terms of the conversation we are having today about improving outcomes for pupils with disadvantage.

The quality of teaching is critically connected both to making sure that we have the right specialist teachers in the right subjects—so that a child is taught by somebody who has the right subject matter background—and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to the length of time that they have been in their role, as they build more confidence as a teacher.

It is about having a mix of both recruitment routes, getting that right and using our evidence so that we are targeting our financial incentives in the most evidence-based way at the subjects that need it most, and, as Susan described, using financial incentives to make sure that we support teachers to stay in their roles and work in the most disadvantaged areas, because we can see that very strong correlation. If you look at schools by pupil premium decile, you can see the relationship between that and higher levels of turnover, so that is why we are deliberately tilting and targeting the recruitment incentives in that way.

Rachel Gilmour: Can I make a couple of observations? I know exactly what you are talking about, because at Tiverton High School in my constituency, which is very disadvantaged, the headteacher has said over and over again that she has a constant number of vacancies.

Something that came across my desk at one of my surgeries was somebody who had left her job as a lawyer and was retraining as a teacher. She was married to somebody in the services and she was spending all her bursary money on childcare, which was the one thing that was going to make her change her mind. I am not expecting you to give me an answer because it is not really a question, but it is something that in real life I have come across in my surgery as a local Member of Parliament.

Chair: Thank you for that. I wholeheartedly agree with what has been said about our teachers. We should thank them all for their work. It is a very special gift. I could not do it. You have to have a gift and a dedication to do it, so we should thank them all.

Q53 **Lloyd Hatton:** It was rightly reflected upon earlier that schools and teachers like to have flexibility and freedom about how they use funding associated with supporting disadvantaged children. Last year the Sutton Trust found that 47% of senior school leaders use pupil premium funding to fill wider gaps in their budgets, which is something I am sure you are aware of. Would you acknowledge that, while a bit of freedom and a bit of flexibility can be useful, if you do not ringfence the funding it can lead to a real-term erosion in how much spending actually reaches disadvantaged children as is intended?

Susan Acland-Hood: It depends on what school leaders are using it for. As I say, the best evidence from the EEF is that investment in high-quality teaching benefits all pupils in the school but benefits the disadvantaged children most. About 80% of a typical school's budget is spent on teachers, so some versions of, "We are investing this in the school budget," if it is going to support high-quality teachers and teaching, may be consistent, in a sense, with the intention of the pupil premium. Other things may be less consistent. It does depend a little bit on where it is going.



You are right that a balance has to be struck. We try to strike that balance by asking schools to clearly report on their use of the pupil premium. We also ask governors to govern and challenge schools on their use of the pupil premium, to look at those pupil premium statements, and to test that the uses of the pupil premium are reasonable and are supported by the evidence to support good performance for those pupils. We also look at core funding and how that is being spent through all our overarching accountability systems. You are right, but the lack of a ringfence is not the same as a lack of accountability for spend.

- Q54 **Lloyd Hatton:** I accept that. That is a very accurate response. Do you accept that there could be a grey area? Some schools will spend it in a correct way and, even if it is going on other things, it will ultimately get back to supporting disadvantaged children, but there is a grey area. If you leave it to schools to use their board of governors to self-scrutinise, or if you leave it to the plans that are drawn up by school leaders, in some schools that might be great and that might be enough but, perhaps in schools that are not performing well, have had a leadership issues or have had a recent change at the top, you could find that the funding does not reach disadvantaged children. There is a real-term erosion in that, no one is any the wiser and it goes under the radar.

Juliet Chua: This comes to a broader conversation about accountability and very clear expectations, as Susan said. The responsibility sits in a number of different places within the system to make sure that we achieve the outcomes that we are collectively talking about today in relation to improving outcomes for children with disadvantage. The expectation is absolutely that the school develops a clear strategy for its pupil premium, that it works in that way with proper input, scrutiny and challenge from the governors or the trustees, and that the responsible body plays a role to oversee that and is essentially part of being held accountable for the outcomes of the school overall.

There needs to be transparency through our performance tables in terms of the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils for the range of metrics and gaps we have been discussing today, as well as the role of Ofsted in looking at the performance of the school overall. Pupil premium is one part of the bigger story about making sure that the school overall achieves the outcomes and meets the needs of the disadvantaged pupils within that. We have also talked a little bit about the new role of the regional improvement support teams in looking at schools and providing more support if they have particular challenges.

- Q55 **Lloyd Hatton:** You spoke earlier about shining a spotlight on good practice and trying to roll that out, particularly at a regional level. Do you think every school leader has a clear understanding of what the pupil premium should and should not be spent on? Does it always provide good value for money?

Susan Acland-Hood: Juliet gave this figure earlier, but about 70% of school leaders in our latest panel survey said that they actively used EEF



evidence in deciding how to spend their pupil premium. That is not a bad figure when it comes to dissemination of evidence, but we would really like it to be closer to 100%. We continue to work really hard to make sure that schools are aware of how they should spend it.

In 2022, we strengthened our approach to the pupil premium and introduced what is described as a menu of approaches. We strengthened the link to the toolkit and showed the menu of approaches. We changed the templates that we encourage schools to use for their plans so that it directly links back to the EEF evidence base. We also sample the strategies. We look at a sample of strategies and we see that the vast majority of those do show links back to the evidence base and what is in the statement.

Again, it is another no-complacency moment. It is one of those things you have to keep talking about and working on. You cannot assume that that is achieved and banked. Continuing to create a really high-quality, professional conversation across the system about evidence is a really important bit of what we do. It is an important bit of teacher professionalism. It is an important bit of our professionalism. It is an important bit of creating a powerful, evidence-led community on what high-quality school practice looks like.

Q56 Chair: To press you a bit on Mr Hatton's important question, Ms Acland-Hood, the Sutton Trust has produced some important evidence for us, which says that those schools that are using the pupil premium, either in whole or in part, have increased from 23% in 2019 to 47% today. That shows that it is to do with pressure on school budgets. But this money is increasingly not going to what it is intended for. What more can your Department do to issue pretty strong guidance or something else to make sure that it is going to what it is supposed to do?

Susan Acland-Hood: It depends what they mean by going into other parts of the school budget. I will give you an example from my time as a school governor. This is a while ago, just in case people were worried about conflicts. There were a number of things the school had been doing with its pupil premium that were very tightly targeted on disadvantaged pupils but not very effective. They could not demonstrate that they were making a difference, and they chose to move some of that pupil premium funding into increasing the number of qualified teachers they had and looking at that around the school. On one level that felt less targeted on disadvantaged pupils, but it was probably a significantly more effective way of spending the money.

If a school with a very tight budget is looking across its budget and saying, "We think cutting some of these things that are part of our core budget will do more harm to the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils than investing in these niche things that look more targeted will do good," then they might well respond to a Sutton Trust survey and say, "We are using our pupil premiums to plug holes in our school budget," but they might still be making good judgments about the impact on disadvantaged



pupils. It is very, very difficult to tell. The question there is: how do you get alongside the school and look at what that is doing to the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils?

One of the things we look at, think about and ask ourselves—indeed, we have these conversations regularly—is whether we should be doing more to support schools where the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils are poorer than you would expect, given the composition of how the school spends its pupil premium, rather than imposing something on all schools.

Q57 Chair: It is all about the devolution of decision making. If we take that tack, surely every school should be required to publish its pupil premium plan of how it is spending this money.

Susan Acland-Hood: They are.

Chair: But they are not all doing it, are they? Only 80% of them are doing it.

Juliet Chua: We talked earlier about sampling. We follow up the sample where we see that that is not taking place. The individual schools we followed up with are now in the process of updating and making sure they do have strategies that are available.

Q58 Chair: Will we find that all of those 20% that are not doing it or have copied last year's plan will be chased up?

Juliet Chua: We take a sampling approach.

Susan Acland-Hood: We cannot do all of them.

Juliet Chua: We cannot do them all, but there is an important message for the whole system that we are deeply interested in the way schools are developing their individual strategies.

I would also note some of the work that we have done that draws on the example of the individual school, using headteachers' blogs and webinars to describe and explain the approaches they are taking. The new template very much emphasises taking a three-year approach to this. Schools are thinking really strategically about the way they are using their resources and making sure that they are maximising the impact of the pupil premium within that. Their plans will be updated on an annual basis, but as part of a three-year approach.

Q59 Lloyd Hatton: To build on the points the Chair made, you said, Susan, that 70% of schools were directly using an evidence base in their plans for how they spend pupil premium funding. Was that what you were saying?

Susan Acland-Hood: Seventy per cent say they have used EEF evidence in putting together their plan.



Lloyd Hatton: It is quite shocking if almost one in three schools is not.

Juliet Chua: I should say—and I did mention this earlier—that we think that is potentially a bit of an underestimate. When we look at the sampling of individual strategies we see a much higher rate of usage. It does fluctuate a little bit year on year.

Q60 **Lloyd Hatton:** I suppose this goes back to where I started, which is that there is a grey area and it is not always easy to see whether the funding is reaching the right pupils, or whether in some cases there is actually a real-term erosion. It is not always clear whether a school is putting forward a plan in an informed way. You are saying that it could be 70%, or it might actually be a bit better than that, but that could also be a situation where almost one in three schools are not using this evidence base to inform how they spend pupil premium funding.

Would you accept that the fact that there is not any ringfence guidance on how this funding is spent means there are some questions that the Department simply does not know the answer to and is unable to ever provide clarity on?

Rachel Gilmour: From what Ms Acland-Hood said, I think that is a bit harsh. I have to say that this is the first time I have been at a hearing when I have heard civil servants use words like “professional” and “deeply interested”, and you have been able to support what you are saying to us very well. We like words like “outcomes” and, to that last question you were asked, the fact that you do track the outcomes is as important as where you put the money, if not more important. There are always going to be grey areas in something like education, where you have such a mishmash of children, regional differentials and different sorts of deprivation. I would not be too disheartened.

Lloyd Hatton: I would just be interested to know where it is—

Rachel Gilmour: Sorry.

Lloyd Hatton: No, no—it is a really important point. For me, it is about the lack of certainty in whether you would be able to answer that point, since you do not know how accurate the 70% figure is and you cannot have any real certainty. I appreciate that you are never going to know everything, but it would be interesting to see how you address that gap and whether ringfencing it is the answer.

Susan Acland-Hood: There are three things I would say. I am not at all complacent about the 70% figure and I do not want to come across that way. I worry about who the 30% are who are not saying yes to that question. We should continue to look at it.

Lloyd Hatton: It is still a significant number.

Susan Acland-Hood: You are right there are definitely some questions we cannot answer. We try really hard to answer as many questions as possible, and what we really try to do is hold on to the professional



curiosity to keep asking ourselves, "How can we find out the answer to the next question?" and keep going.

I am not sure the lack of ringfencing is the cause of the greyness. Some of it is because the approaches that work best for disadvantaged pupils overlap so heavily with the things that work for all pupils, so it is quite difficult to split out something and say, "This is specifically and only for the disadvantaged pupils in my school," because many of the things you might do, genuinely based on the evidence, are in that space of really high-quality, high-expectation teaching for all students.

These are questions we need to keep asking ourselves. Particularly when resources are constrained, working hard with professionals to make sure that we are getting the best value for money for every pound of public money we are spending gets more and more important. I appreciate the support, but I also appreciate the challenge. We should keep going at this and ask ourselves these challenging questions.

The final thing I would say is that I do think teacher professionalism and leader professionalism is important in this. There is always a bit of a balance. If we get really prescriptive and tell people what to do, there is a risk that we reduce the extent to which people engage with, think about and focus on choice making and understanding why they are doing what they are doing. Again, I do not say that glibly. It is a balance you have to think about.

For example, we will sometimes pump prime or start a new approach with funding, a bit as we talked about on NTP. At the moment, for example, we are giving dedicated funding to Nuffield Early Language Intervention, or NELI, because it is a really well-evidenced approach to early language. I personally love the fact that its acronym is NELI, but anyway. It requires quite a big investment from schools; it is quite a big change, and when you ask people to change their practice there is a really good argument for pump priming and asking a bit more, but ideally you get to the point where you can mainstream and ask people to own a bit more of that choice making and think professionally about it. Over time, you then build a stronger evidence-driven professional culture. It is hard. You have to work at getting that right.

Q61 Lloyd Hatton: It is a balance.

On a slightly different area of questioning, I suppose we have all reflected, this afternoon, that there are a huge number of profound and often competing challenges facing schools, particularly where there are a large number of disadvantaged students. If I look at my own constituency, there is a higher than the national average number of SEND pupils, higher than the national average number of persistent absences, and higher than the national average number of children eligible for free school meals.

Where you have often quite acute and competing demands, how is the



Department working to encourage schools towards having longer-term sustainable goals to tackle them? Too often, schools are firefighting and taking a more short-term approach because they are just trying to keep their heads above the water. Is there a way that the Department is working with those schools to enable them to address those often quite difficult and competing challenges?

Susan Acland-Hood: I will say a couple of things on this and bring Juliet in. First of all, specifically on disadvantage, as Juliet mentioned we have started asking schools to make their pupil premium plan a three-year plan and actively to think about that longer-term picture, rather than just planning year to year. Ironically, we think one of the reasons why we might have seen some schools that did not update their plan in-year is that they have heard "three-year plan" as "write it and just leave it", whereas we want a three-year plan, but we also want people to check in on it each year, make sure it is working and adjust.

We also, again over time, have been doing our best—and some of the funding cycle makes this challenging—to try to make sure we can give schools visibility of budgets in advance. As we come up for a three-year spending review we will make a case about how far we can go in trying to make sure we can offer some of that certainty.

Where we have schools that are really struggling, we have an infrastructure of support through the ESFA that can come alongside schools and support them in thinking about financial planning and financial challenges. We have some good instruments through that, including work that allows schools to stand back and think about integrated planning of finances and the other work that they do to try to manage. Again, that is for those that are in really straitened circumstances.

We also work quite hard with the association of school business managers, a community who do not always get shouted out in events like this but who are really important figures in schools, are increasingly professionalised and expert, and work alongside headteachers to think really hard about the planning of school resources and allocation across strategic priorities.

Q62 **Lloyd Hatton:** Do you think the current system is robust enough to ensure that schools are able to make that shift from short-term firefighting to longer-term goals that need to be reached in a clear timeframe? Do you also think the Department has communicated to schools clearly what the consequences are if performance does fall short?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think schools are pretty clear. Most schools feel quite accountable for their performance. It is important that they do, appropriately, because that is the entitlement of children.

On funding, we know we see variation across the system in school, trust and other responsible body capability in managing funding and finance,



and planning ahead. It is something we have worked on over quite a long period to try to build that financial planning capability. We see some schools and trusts that are now really, really strong in this and really capable, and they will come and have incredibly thoughtful, well-informed and long-term conversations with us. It is something we continue. It is another area where, if we could support everyone in the system to be at the place where the strongest are, we would have a much more robust picture overall, and that is the aim.

Juliet Chua: The other part of this conversation is about clarity of outcomes from a national perspective. Where we started the conversation was the opportunity mission and a very clear sense from the Government of what we care most about for the school system for the coming period. We have talked about attendance as a critical priority. We came before the Committee and talked about special educational needs previously, and today's conversation is about attainment and high and rising standards for disadvantaged. That sense of building a very clear, core framework, with a very strong desire to see good practice driving up across the system, also helps individual schools and trusts to think about where they sit within that overall story and collective mission.

Q63 Lloyd Hatton: On the accountability side, Ofsted has been in the headlines a huge amount over the past couple of years, so I wondered whether you could speak a little bit to the recent overhaul of the Ofsted grading system, removing single-word judgments, and what impact you think that will have on the accountability side of things. Have you in any way sensed that, because there has been so much churn at Ofsted, that might be negatively impacting its ability to hold schools to account and to make sure that there is the right support and the right funding reaches disadvantaged children?

Susan Acland-Hood: As you say, the Government made it clear in the manifesto and then very early on that they would remove single-headline Ofsted grades, and they took that action quickly. Ofsted reports being issued now look at sub-judgments. There is also rapid work going on in Ofsted, across all its remits, not just schools, and a consultation will come forward from Ofsted shortly proposing the replacement.

It is really important that single-headline grades manage to be both relatively low-information for parents and really high-stakes for schools. It is really important that we replace them with something that gives better, more granular information but is still very clear and still appropriately holds schools to account across the breadth of what they do.

It is difficult to talk about before Ofsted comes forward with its proposals. There has been quite a lot of speculation about what might be in them, but Ministers are working very closely with Ofsted to make sure that there is better accountability, not less accountability. Fundamentally, Ofsted is there as the champion of children, making sure that standards are as we should expect them to be and that we are holding schools to



account for performance in a way that is clear and has high expectations, but is also reasonable and appropriate.

As Juliet has said, the second part of that is to link that back to the support that is then offered through the RISE teams and the Department, which will both be able to get alongside more schools than can be touched at the moment by structural intervention, and to ensure that, where Ofsted is highlighting good practice, which is also part of its role, we have some mechanisms to spread that practice across the system. That is the starting point for the work.

Finally, to take this back to the focus of this Committee on disadvantaged pupils, the chief inspector is incredibly focused on making sure that Ofsted is able to look really effectively at how schools are serving all their pupils and whether they are doing the best for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. He said to the Education Select Committee last week that where a school is serving disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils well, it is highly likely to be serving all other pupils well.

Q64 **Lloyd Hatton:** It is a key starting point. Finally, as we see that change in the way Ofsted works as the inspector, how central do you think examining how disadvantaged children are supported will be to those changes? Do you think that will be more prominent than it has been up until now, the same, or not so much?

Susan Acland-Hood: It will be absolutely central.

Chair: We have had a really constructive hearing this afternoon. I was really pleased to hear that, for the £9.2 billion that we spend in one way or another trying to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, you are not in any way complacent about trying to close the attainment gap and do even better for those disadvantaged children so that they get the best possible outcomes for life.

I thank Ms Acland-Hood and colleagues very much for attending the Committee today as witnesses. An uncorrected transcript of this hearing will be published on the Committee's website in the coming days. The Committee will consider the evidence provided and will produce a report with recommendations in due course. Thank you very much indeed.