



Public Services Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: Falling primary school rolls

Wednesday 24 June 2026

11.05 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Bradley (The Chair); Lord Barber of Chittlehampton; Lord Faulkner of Worcester; Baroness Hollins; Lord Johnson of Marylebone; Lord Mohammed of Tinsley; Lord Mott; Baroness Pidgeon; Baroness Redfern; Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson; Baroness Watkins of Tavistock.

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Questions 12 - 26

Witnesses

Pepe Di'lasio, General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders; Jon Andrews, Head of Analysis and Director for School System and Performance, Education Policy Institute; Jenna Julius, Research Director for Systems and Structures, National Foundation for Educational Research.

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Examination of witnesses

Pepe Di’lasio, Jon Andrews and Jenna Julius.

Q12 The Chair: I welcome Jenna Julius, Jon Andrews and Pepe Di’lasio to the second oral session of our short inquiry into falling primary school rolls. We are grateful for your time this morning. We will go straight into the session. Can you introduce yourselves, please?

Jenna Julius: Thank you so much for having me here today. I am a research director at the National Foundation for Educational Research—the NFER. I lead our work on education systems and structures, which includes our work on falling pupil rolls. The NFER is an education charity whose mission is to support positive change in education systems; we do this by producing research and evidence on education policy and practice.

Pepe Di’lasio: I represent the Association of School and College Leaders, which is made up of over 25,000 school and college leaders ranging from assistant head teachers through to chief executives. We have over 1,500 leaders in the primary sector.

Jon Andrews: I am the head of analysis at the Education Policy Institute. We also carry out research from the early years through to schools and into the labour market. I lead on our school system and performance work, which includes how we structure the school system and work on pupil numbers and school funding.

The Chair: Thank you again for your time this morning. Baroness Watkins will ask the first question.

Q13 Baroness Watkins of Tavistock: I declare an interest: I have a close family member in a senior leadership team in a secondary academy school. We are interested in how you are identifying the extent to which primary schools’ rolls are expected to change and—not in huge detail—the long-term effects of that across the whole system. What are the causes and scales of the issues? Do they differ? For example, I live on Dartmoor, but, outside Plymouth, we have one of the biggest new towns, Sherford, where we have built a new school. There are threats to some of our rural primary schools. We would like to hear from you how the area, the type of school, housing developments, transport and connectivity ties in with what you are finding at the moment.

Jon Andrews: Primary numbers peaked in 2018-19. We have seen this decline for seven or eight years now. They are already down by around 250,000. The Department for Education projects that that will fall by a further 300,000 by the end of the decade. For context, 500,000 is almost an entire year group, so this has a really big impact on the system. Obviously, that will flow through to secondary eventually; we have seen the numbers in secondary start to fall this year, based on DfE data.

Interestingly, the picture is not consistent across the country. The highest-profile area is London. London’s numbers started to fall before those of any other area, and it has already seen a fall of around 11% in

its pupil numbers in primary school. The north-east, Yorkshire and the Humber have seen a 6% or 7% fall as well. In other parts of the country, there have been falls, but typically more like 3% or 4%; we will see that over the next five years as well. London will not be falling quite as much as it has been, but it will still be the leader.

Even within those regions, we are seeing big differences as well. We did some work last year looking at London specifically. In some areas, such as Islington, there was a potential 30% reduction in total pupil numbers over 10 years. In other areas—particularly the eastern boroughs such as Barking, Havering and places like that—there are going to be either small falls or small increases.

The main national picture is being driven by a fall in the birth rate, which peaked in the early 2010s. We had a post-millennium baby boom, but that has fallen away. It is difficult to know exactly what is going to happen with people; population projections are notoriously difficult. The ONS projections on birth rate over the next few years suggest that it will pick up slightly but not enough to reverse these falls. We will still be quite a way behind where we were 10 or 15 years ago.

Jenna Julius: It is really important to be aware not only that these impacts are really uneven across local areas—we know from the National Audit Office report that, even among local authorities expecting to see a decline, two-thirds are expecting to see an uptick in some of their local areas—but that it is also within those areas that are being impacted. It is very much not an effect that is impacting all schools.

Equally, it is not going to affect the schools of choice in a local area to the same degree as it is going to affect schools that might not be the ones that parents are choosing. We have seen that in our research. For example, we looked at schools' Ofsted headline ratings. Those no longer exist, but they related strongly to how much capacity schools had. As you might expect, schools with lower headline Ofsted ratings tended to have more available capacity.

The other thing that we have seen in our research is a correlation between local authority-maintained schools being more likely to have available capacity, as compared to academy schools. This is just a correlation. We do not know what the drivers of that are for sure, but it potentially points to differences in the influence that local authorities might have on different schools in their local areas.

Another big area of difference that we see across schools—we published some new research on this today—is more deprived schools being disproportionately affected by falling rolls. We looked at this by looking at schools that were more deprived in 2018-19; by deprivation, I mean disadvantage based on free school meal eligibility. Those schools that were most deprived in 2018-19 have seen the biggest falls in rolls since then.

If we look at it from the other side of the coin, the schools that have seen the biggest falls in rolls since 2018-19 are also among the most deprived schools in 2018-19 and have seen the biggest increase in free school meal eligibility over that period. We do not know whether that increase in free school meal eligibility is necessarily tied to falling rolls, but it certainly suggests that this impact is disproportionately affecting schools that are serving our most deprived communities and that, if anything, it might be getting worse.

Pepe Di'lasio: More generally, we are very grateful for this inquiry; we have been talking about this issue with colleagues at the DfE for three or four years. We feel that, although we have consistently warned about this oncoming issue, we are currently sleepwalking into a problem that we know exists. There are so many unknown issues in the education sector that we are tackling at the moment, but this is a known known and is something on which I hope this inquiry can shine a light.

We have heard about the regional disparities. I will talk briefly about what we think they come under, in terms of the reasons that are forcing them. We are seeing changing immigration patterns across the country. Children and young people are not returning to school and are missing education post pandemic. We are seeing an increase in the proportion of children who are electively home-educated and parents choosing to keep young people at home for a number of reasons.

Socio-economic factors have been mentioned. For example, push factors and the cost of living in particular areas push people out of urban areas into other parts of the country. They also displace people into what are deemed cheaper areas in which they can live. The National Audit Office reported that the free schools programme reinforced this problem by creating capacity in places where it was not needed. That capacity still exists.

Baroness Watkins may be aware of the impact of tourism in her part of the country. Particularly in areas such as the south-west and in cities such as York, where there are large numbers of Airbnbs, we are hearing about families moving out of those areas. As a result, schools based in those areas no longer have a viable catchment area because of the impact and flow of tourism.

These are massive areas, but they are things that are known. If we have greater coherence between the NHS, birth rates, the collection of data from the DfE and the information that local authorities hold, and if we connect that with colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, we can produce a strategy that adapts to and prepares for this. At the moment, that does not exist and is not being thought through. It is an incredibly worrying position.

The Chair: When you say that it does not exist, are you saying that there is no common platform between each of those elements of service to enable that data sharing?

Pepe Di'lasio: I would say that it does not exist. There is no common platform that allows them to share with great coherence.

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock: What you are actually saying—it is the sub-question, is it not?—is that the data is there but nobody is correlating the different strands of data to inform things.

Pepe Di'lasio: It is one thing to correlate it, but it is another thing to make a strategic decision on where to open or reduce the size of a school. No one is making decisions on that either, which is another issue.

Q14 **Baroness Pidgeon:** We heard in evidence last week from Lincolnshire about coastal issues, with seasonal workers coming in around Easter and dumping their children in local schools, which did not have the funding for them. Then, by September, they are gone again. I am not sure where they go to live or whether they live with family the rest of the time. I had never heard of this before; it was an eye-opener. Is that something you have any data on? Is that something you are picking up through all your work and conversations?

The Chair: Skegness was mentioned.

Pepe Di'lasio: I have been a head teacher on the edge of Lincolnshire, and I have had transient people come into my community and other communities. In that instance, they will be allocated admission to schools that have spaces. What you are hearing there is an exacerbation of the point that Jenna made: some schools that are struggling for places have the added challenge of people being parachuted in for short periods of time. The school does not know what their needs are or what their profiles are, but then they move on, perhaps according to seasonal work. That is a key part of the flow of the population across the country right now.

Baroness Pidgeon: Is there any data around that?

Jon Andrews: The Department for Education has the school census, which is done termly. It collects data in October, January and May, I think. So the DfE will know where a pupil is at any point in time. If pupils are moving outside of that period, such as late in the summer term because they are moving into coastal areas and so on, the DfE will not necessarily be able to pick that up. Pupils will be recorded at their original school in the January or summer census, and then probably back there again in the autumn census, but the department will not be able to pick up that bit where pupils move in between.

Jenna Julius: To pick up on that, one point that was not made last week when this was discussed is the fact that this is partially reflected in the national funding formula. There is a mobility factor in the national funding formula which takes into account movements of pupils outside the October census over the past three years. The key thing to note with that is that, because it is over three years, there is less of a direct effect than having that money for that pupil today, and also that that factor is paid only on mobility above 6% of the school's roll, so they do not get it for all

pupils on their roll who might be mobile. There is some adjustment in the funding for it, but not a complete adjustment.

Baroness Hollins: I want to ask Jon a question about the different contexts. Are faith-based schools affected as much as other schools? If not, why?

Jon Andrews: It is not something we have looked at directly; I am looking at Jenna to see whether NFER has. Looking at how disadvantaged pupils, say, or pupils with SEND, might be affected by this, we have some concerns about how the accountability system works. That becomes important for faith schools because they tend to achieve higher results. They tend to have fewer disadvantaged pupils and fewer pupils with special educational needs. I have not looked specifically at the data on faith schools, but I suspect that they are protected slightly, in that they remain popular, so when numbers start to fall, they are the ones that parents are still looking to go to. But we would have to go back and look at that data to see what is actually happening.

Jenna Julius: We have not looked at it either, but I would echo Jon's instinct on what the data might show.

Q15 **Lord Johnson of Marylebone:** I am new to the committee and need to declare my interests. I do not think I have any, but I have to declare that. I want to go back to the point that Mr Di'lasio made around join-up. What you said is very interesting because it seems to reinforce the idea that we plan public services in departmental silos but they are actually experienced by families in places. Do you think there is a piece missing in how we integrate services? If so, how would you address that in government terms? Where would any responsibility lie for joining up thinking about school capacity with the NHS, transport, SEND provision and so on? Who should own that responsibility across government, and what should it look like in terms of policy work?

Pepe Di'lasio: You make an excellent point. I will talk to you as a former head teacher here, because we would often have a group of priority students in our schools who were our most vulnerable, and often they were vulnerable in a number of different ways that could be connected to social care, police, housing or local authorities. It was always challenging to gather those key partners together around the table for meetings around that child. Having someone hold the ring on that was something that we were hoping would be a central part of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act, which came through the Lords in the last year.

There are some welcome additions with that, concerning clarity over following those young people. Making sure that they are named and that we know where they are, or, more importantly, where they are not, provides some reassurance, but, as you say, to have a named area that was responsible for that and had the authority and autonomy to bring those people together would make a massive difference, particularly for the most vulnerable. I believe that it would also make better use of our disparate resources at a time when resources are tight, giving us greater

bang for our buck than perhaps we have at the moment, where the sum of the parts does not equal as much as we could put together.

- Q16 **Baroness Redfern:** Like Jo, I have to declare that I have no interests here. My quick question concerns the falling rolls and working with local authorities and the NHS. Do you think it would help to have a national threshold for spare capacity, to help local authorities in particular to plan ahead?

Pepe Di'lasio: One of the recommendations I would like to make today is that we have somebody identified as a national ombudsman for overseeing this, because at the moment it is left between too many different people. We have what I would call a Mexican stand-off between local authorities, schools and NHS trusts, which are all waiting for one another to move. There is no dedicated, independent, neutral person responsible for taking a lead role in this and making planned, proactive, sensible decisions for those young people and communities. At the moment, it is left to whichever school happens to fall foul first, have parents vote with their feet or have staff say, "We don't think this school is going to be viable next year. We're going to find a job somewhere else or move somewhere else". It is the worst of all worlds.

- Q17 **Lord Barber of Chittlehampton:** Thank you for the evidence so far. I want to ask about the implications of these falling rolls for policy. We have started to look at that in response to previous questions, but there are obviously substantial implications. There are also learnings to be done for what happens in the secondary phase of this wave of falling rolls. Are there implications for the way in which the national funding formula operates, for example? You mentioned one, Jenna, but are there other implications for the way in which the national funding formula operates that you would like to see? Are there implications for policy on choice for parents? I was an advocate for choice for parents all the way through the Blair years, but does that policy need adjusting? Are there implications for in-year admissions, disadvantaged students or turnover? They are important.

To pick up your point, Pepe, I have been dealing with your predecessors since you had a headquarters on a roundabout in Highbury in the 1980s. Your point about the DfE sleepwalking into this is quite a harsh critique, which may well be right—I am not arguing with it—but I would like to know what you would like it to do that it is not doing.

Jenna Julius: I will start on the funding. Clearly the biggest implication of falling pupil numbers is on the funding side. Funding is very closely pupil-led. Over 90% of the funding allocated through the national funding formula is led by pupils. There is a lag in that, so schools are funded based on their number of pupils in the previous year. There is a degree to which schools can respond but, obviously, the big pressure on schools is the fact that a small number of pupils lost on your roll does not mean that you can necessarily adjust your costs in the short term, yet it could represent a significant proportion of your budget.

The DfE provides a small amount of falling-rolls funding. At the moment, the eligibility for that is just too restrictive and it is not sizeable enough to reflect the current challenges that schools are facing. To illustrate that, that funding is allocated to local authorities through the criteria on medium super output areas—sorry to get into the technicalities. For a local area to qualify for that, they have to have a 10% fall in their rolls over a one-year period, which is clearly a very high bar to qualify for that funding. Schools then qualify for that funding only if they are expecting those places to be needed within the next two years. So, yes, that funding is available, but it is very limited at the moment.

Lord Barber of Chittlehampton: Are you arguing for a change in that? My question is about the implications for policy. That is a very clear statement of where it is, but would you advocate doing anything about it?

Jenna Julius: Yes. We are saying that that support should be expanded but, to come back to what Pepe was saying, it needs to be expanded within a wider strategy for dealing with falling rolls, rather than just making more money available to these schools. It is about looking at it in the round and giving adequate support to ensure that schools are supported. For example, if you are a school that has lost these pupils but you still have too many pupils to move to a two-form entry or to a composite class, it is about making sure that you have the funding in the interim and that it will not come at the expense of young people's education.

We have seen from the research that we have done that schools are very clearly responding to the impact that falling rolls are having on them. It is a big area of concern for them, and they are making changes. We can see that in terms of staffing. From what schools are telling us and what we can see in the administrative data, there are reductions in teacher and teacher assistant numbers. Also, in the survey data that we collected last summer on our primary schools, for example, among those schools that were at least slightly concerned about the impact of falling rolls, around half told us that they were reducing extracurricular activities and targeted support as a response. All of that is going to have a very direct impact on young people's outcomes, particularly those most vulnerable.

Pepe Di'lasio: Perhaps I could talk more generally, because not all schools will be affected equally by this issue. That is what makes some of the strategic thinking quite difficult, but none the less equally important. Jenna has already described the idea of the national funding formula and it being 92% pupil-led, as it were. Perhaps I will give you an insight into a classroom, because a drop of 10 pupils will reduce the funding for a primary school by £55k. That is a teacher. But for those remaining pupils in that school, you cannot just take the teacher out of that room, the pupils that remain still need a teacher. The outputs remain the same but the incomes are significantly pressurised.

Staffing reductions caused by financial constraints are likely to have a negative impact on teacher and leader workload as well. So while you are taking the money out of the school, you still have to keep the teacher in

the classroom, and the leadership responsibilities and all the roles, particularly for our members, remain the same. What we are seeing is a compound issue of more and more responsibilities being placed on fewer people in schools. That is having an impact on the recruitment and retention of leaders in schools as well.

Lord Barber of Chittlehampton: And have you, the ASCL, written a publication for your members on how to manage that, based on the best practices you have seen?

Pepe Di'lasio: No, but that is a very good idea.

Lord Barber of Chittlehampton: What would you like the DfE to do?

Pepe Di'lasio: I think we would be calling for the DfE to build protection into the national funding formula to allow for the transition periods to be more smoothly managed, and to take into account all those other global costs that are coming in as well. We are all aware, I am sure, of energy costs in our own homes and all the issues connected to the variances that schools are having to face. They are facing those as well, with a funding amount that is going down and is beyond their control. Many of our leaders are telling us about that. Those are the things we are helping them with.

Jon Andrews: Can I just come in on that? We have also advocated for protections in the national funding formula for this. I do not think that is inconsistent with how the national funding formula currently operates. It already has protections to make sure your per-pupil amounts do not fall too much from year to year. It has protections to make sure your overall per-pupil funding does not fall below a particular threshold. What we would want to see is, on a year-to-year basis, a school's overall budget not being allowed to fall too much, because this should allow—Pepe might agree or disagree—more time for schools to start planning for what their workforce looks like, so that it is not taken as a big hit in one year.

Pepe Di'lasio: If I may, though, we are talking about financing and that is the appropriate thing to do. But we also need to remember that the schools we are referring to here are often a lone primary school at the moment in the heart of their community, which offers so much to that community over and above what takes place in the learning in those classrooms. To see the demise of them—I mean, we have had to see the demise of the local pub and post office in that community, and the next thing is the local primary school in that community. Before long, if you look at your definition of “community”, you would wonder whether any of those things are valued. It is about how we value them and make sure that we retain them in our local communities, so that we retain a community.

Q18 **Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson:** I too have no conflicts of interest to declare, except that I worked in the Treasury for a long time, so I love this discussion about financing. I am going to ask you to adopt for a second a Treasury mindset: let us assume and take it as read that

everyone would like to see an expanded budget for education, but for any marginal pound, where would you put it? We have been saying that it would be really good if there were better protections for all schools with falling rolls. I think you just made an argument that perhaps we should think about additional funding for schools in rural areas, where they might play an outsized role in their community and the children in those areas would be disproportionately affected by closure because of travel distances, for example. We have also talked about all schools facing financial pressures. If you had a marginal pound, where would you put it?

Pepe Di'lasio: I will let my colleagues come in in a minute, but I do not think I have actually asked for additional funding, because what we are actually looking at here is reducing birthrates. What we are saying is: let us keep the funding as it is, so that we can use some of these adaptations that we are talking about and not have clawback from the Treasury but maintain the funding—not additional money, but a maintenance of the amount.

Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson: I think the question still stands: where would you prioritise? If you are in the Department for Education and are thinking—this is not how the Treasury will see it, but I accept your premise—“We have additional money. Where do we put it?” Where would you put it?

Pepe Di'lasio: At the moment, the priority is connected to the White Paper and to supporting students with SEND. I am sure we will go on to talk about some of our most disadvantaged and most vulnerable at the moment. It would be to ensure the aspirations of the White Paper and make sure that moving those students who have been treated in special schools, or are currently electively home educated for a number of reasons, are enabled to be in a mainstream school—to attend their local community school—and to make sure that those schools had the necessary resources to support them as best as possible.

Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson: I am interested in what your colleagues have to say.

Jon Andrews: What we have spoken about is maintaining the overall pot of money but using it to target funding towards particular levels of disadvantage. At the moment, we have a system where, if you are eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years, you attract additional funding. What we do not have is a system that looks at those who are persistently disadvantaged: those students who are in the deepest poverty are getting some of the lowest outcomes. Our annual report has been looking at this for the last 10 years or so. If you leave school as a disadvantaged pupil—someone eligible for the pupil premium—you tend to be on average the equivalent of around 19 months of learning behind your peers. If you have been persistently disadvantaged—eligible for free school meals for most of your time in school—that increases to 22 months. We do not currently have a system that recognises that difference.

We have called for an addition to the pupil premium that is particularly targeted on those in persistent disadvantage, as well as increasing the value of the pupil premium itself for all disadvantaged students. The pupil premium has dropped in value by between 10% and 15% since 2015, so schools do not have the spending power that they once had for disadvantaged pupils. We have seen that the gap has not closed. The persistent disadvantage gap has been the same, pretty much, since we started measuring it. The disadvantage gap started to close a bit. It opened up again after the pandemic, but with no real progress there. The Government obviously have their target to halve the disadvantage gap by 2040. That is a really big ambition, but it is not currently backed up by the kind of funding we would expect to see.

The Chair: Do you want to comment on that?

Jenna Julius: I certainly echo everything Jon has said, but for me these financial trade-offs come back to the point about lack of strategy. At the moment, we are sort of carrying on as we are. We are letting schools close at the last minute, basically, when the reserves are up and all the teachers have fled. In terms of the young people who are in those schools and making the best use of taxpayer money, that approach is clearly much worse than having a strategic, planned approach where we are thinking across local areas and making these decisions proactively. That is actually the heart of it, rather than thinking about how you are prioritising money right now.

If we can make those strategic decisions, we can help reduce some of the inefficiency. The only other thing I would say is that, ultimately, particularly when it comes to talking about small, rural primary schools, a lot of this is a political choice rather than a financial choice. On financial efficiency I would expect, and we have not looked at this, that some of these small, rural primary schools that we are talking about are not necessarily the most financially efficient schools to be running. There is a political decision about how central they are to their local communities and the impact that closing them might have. You can see this in work that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has done, published last year. It looks at the long-term trends in the number of schools and number of pupils, and you can see that our primary school numbers have been falling since the 1980s. Over that time, pupil numbers have gone up and down, but there has been a broad decline in primary schools. I think there is a decision here around those schools in our local communities and to what extent we continue funding them because of the central role that they play. That is perhaps a broader political decision to be made.

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock: Nobody seems to consider that if you shut a rural school, it may cost £100,000 to send 11 children 30 miles every day in different taxis. Even simple things like that do not seem to be coming into local authority equations. Is it a fair statement that the one budget does not talk to the other?

Jenna Julius: I obviously cannot speak to what is going on in different local authorities, but this comes back to the point on strategic planning in

the round. School transport costs and the amount of time spent travelling to schools are clearly key considerations.

- Q19 Lord Barber of Chittlehampton:** I have a question for Jon to follow up on the pupil premium, and I totally understand your argument. Surely with the pupil premium, it is a matter of how that money is tied to the pupils who really need it, whom you talked about, and what you do with the money to help them, rather than just general amounts of money for disadvantaged pupils?

Jon Andrews: This is why we advocated for it to be via the pupil premium, because the pupil premium has, alongside it, obligations for a school to understand how they are using that money to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. We have argued for it to be there rather than just through the national funding formula. The NFF creates complexities because of all the protections we have been talking about, and it does not necessarily target it. Obviously, schools have access to the likes of the Education Endowment Foundation for information on where spending money can have the biggest influence, but the biggest influence on a pupil is having a good teacher in front of them. That is where schools are, at some point, going to start struggling if budgets keep falling. Staffing costs 80% of a school's budget, so they will start to look there.

Lord Barber of Chittlehampton: In about 2010, I did a report for the DfE on schools and where the unit costs got out of hand. Back then, there were about 200 members. You could still have much smaller schools if you had one headteacher and three schools, for example, or a headteacher and deputy running three schools. It may be completely irrelevant now, but it is worth looking up. I did not declare my lack of interests but do so now.

- Q20 Lord Faulkner of Worcester:** I have no remunerated interests, although I have two daughters who are schoolteachers, one of them in France, and I am patron of New College Worcester, which is an all-through college for blind and visually impaired people from all over the country. I want to dig a bit deeper into what you think the schools and admission authorities should do to deal with falling rolls. You have talked about closing schools and sending people away to other schools by taxi, and so on, but do you get the sense there is any sort of proper planned policy for this?

Jenna Julius: Based on what I have already said, the answer is probably no. We know from our evidence that schools themselves are doing a huge amount to try to handle the impact. In terms of what Lord Barber said, in our survey evidence schools tell us they are increasingly pulling new functions across schools. That is happening to a greater degree in academy trusts, but it is also happening in local authority schools. There are certainly schools looking at any efficiencies that they can bring alongside those changes in staffing and provision.

We also know that increasing numbers of schools are looking at expanding mixed-age classes. Around a quarter of schools in England use mixed-age classes. In our survey last summer, among the schools that are slightly concerned about falling pupil rolls, around 30% said they were looking to increase the use of mixed-age classes, so schools are clearly looking at the models they are using within their schools. The key thing about mixed-age classes is that there is a real lack of evidence around them, particularly in an English context. There has been pretty much no real new work done in the last 25 years. In collaboration with the University of Nottingham, we are currently doing some research funded by the Nuffield Foundation, and we are planning to share some very initial insights informed by our early findings to help the committee. Certainly, it is a big gap in support for schools and thinking about the school system. Despite the fact that one in four schools already has mixed-age classes and it is going to be increasing across the school system, there has really been a lack of thought and guidance around supporting schools transitioning to that but also supporting those schools that are already doing it. For example, one of the things that has come out of our early findings is the fact that the whole accountability system—all the support that schools get—is geared up to schools that have single-age classes, yet this is something that is already common in our schools and becoming increasingly so.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Do you think the schools and education authorities are giving as much attention to this as they could?

Jenna Julius: We know that this is clearly an area of concern, both for local authorities and schools, but from our analysis of local authority data—this was a couple of years ago now—even though the vast majority of local authorities were projecting declines in falling rolls in their local areas, only a handful were making plans to reduce primary school places in their local areas. There was a clear mismatch between what local authorities were expecting to see in their local area and concrete plans to match the capacity to what the demand is going to be.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: What about guidance from the DfE? Is that coming through?

Pepe Di'lasio: Where we have seen some proactive movement connected to this in the last year is the rollout of breakfast clubs hosted in spaces that are perhaps being vacated in schools. We are also seeing the rollout of family hubs as well, so that schools can be the place in their communities for health benefits and connections for young people. It is fair to say, as you are hearing, that there is not an overall strategy looking at the opportunities that are part of some of the issues we face. Some of the best examples I have seen on a localised level are when schools step out and into the world of youth services. You will be aware of the interim Milburn report on young people aged 16 to 19 not in education and training. They require extra support and guidance, and schools are a good place for them to get this, in that it is usually in the heart of their community and somewhere that they can connect with

quite well. Some of the best projects I have seen connected both with those not in education and learning and younger people are those in which we see intergenerational learning, when young people work with elderly elements of their community to support them in their isolation and loneliness, and they work together to support the young people's literacy and communication skills. There is some really innovative practice taking place, but it is by no means part of the strategy. It is a creative use of space, with individual schools and trusts going into their communities and trying to work to benefit the local environment.

Jon Andrews: I come back to Jenna's point about whether local authorities are responding on the scale that you would expect. If you look at the published admissions numbers—the numbers of places that are available in schools—they have fallen by about 35,000 since their peak about 10 years ago, but the number of applications has fallen by around 100,000, so the reductions in school places have not matched that. We have seen reductions in the number of teachers in the primary sector. That has not been on the same scale as reductions in pupils, in terms of percentages, but it is in the same ballpark. At the same time, we are seeing an increase in the number of teaching assistants, which probably reflects that schools are having to deal with more demands: more pupils growing up in poverty, having special educational needs and so on. So there are bits of the system that are not necessarily responding to the pupil numbers, but they are responding to other challenges that are going on.

Q21 **Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson:** I just come back to this point about mixed-age classes. It is something that came up in the written evidence that we received. My understanding, which you were just reiterating, Jenna, is that there is not good guidance for teachers or head teachers for how to best teach. Jon's point was that the best thing we can do for a child's life chances is to put them in front of a good teacher. Teachers do not have training or guidance on how to implement mixed-age teaching well. Is that right, or am I overreading?

Jenna Julius: Based on our evidence to date, that is certainly the case, particularly at a big-picture level. There are certain areas where there might be better support, but initial teacher training is just not designed for mixed-age teaching. There are differences, I think, in areas where mixed-age schools are common, because then at least teachers are getting during their training that experience of being in mixed-age schools. But in areas where it is just not the norm, thinking about the schools which might be looking to adopt this as rolls continue to fall, as is going to be more the case, it is much more challenging in that context, because you are less likely to have staff who have even that experience.

Pepe Di'lasio: I would be stronger than that. I do not think these decisions are being made on pedagogical or child-centred reasons. They are being based on financial decisions where people in those environments have no choice other than to mix the groups in order to meet the requirements of having a teacher in front of them. Anyone who has ever been in a classroom and dealt with a classroom of similar-age

students, if you imagine doubling that and doubling the level of demand and need on those, inevitably the people at the extremes of that class are going to be the ones that either demand the most attention or get the least attention, depending on which end they happen to be. So it is not necessarily in the best interests of anyone, really.

Jenna Julius: There is also an issue not just in terms of the guidance and support but around the data that the department is collecting. Currently, the department collects aggregate information on classes from schools, but that is not at the pupil level. From assessing the implications of mixed-age classes and delivering an evidence base for that, that is a really key evidence gap. The Government already collect plenty of pupil-level data. Making that data also at the class level would really expand our opportunities to build the evidence for that.

Q22 Lord Mohammed of Tinsley: A lot of the questions have been around the challenges of falling school numbers, but we have veered into the possibilities and the opportunities. I just want to probe further in terms of what further opportunities there could be. I know you mentioned family hubs and their potential, and the Milburn review, which is something of personal interest to me as well. But what opportunities could there be for schools, and how do we work with local authority admissions, schools and other partners to talk that up? At the moment, there are all the concerns about falling school numbers and how this can impact us. How can we change that rightful focus to also say, "By the way, there might be some opportunities here"?

Pepe Di'lasio: Schools are often at the heart and geographically in the centre of our communities. They provide a structural base that many people have either associated with, been with, connect with, or can certainly get to very easily. There are tremendous opportunities for the structures within a school to do much more than just provide learning in a classroom, and schools are looking at that right now, both in terms of the financial stability prop that they can gain from doing more than a job that they do from 8.30 am until 3.30 pm on the day and look at what they can do in the evenings to help with adult learning and connect with those NEETs. But at a time where rolls are falling, they are looking at how they can support their local communities with the space that they have.

It is one of those moments when perhaps we can return to that earlier discussion around what I would call Whitehall silos and bringing those silos together to be based around a school, not necessarily to be led by the school, but to be based in that school to connect with broader elements of the community. It speaks to so much of so many of the missions that this current Government have spoken about so strongly and so boldly, yet we sit here right now trying to work out how we cope with something that we know has been happening in our primary schools and is going to happen in our secondary schools, and is only going to get worse if we do not do something about it.

There are endless possibilities for innovation and creativity here that I think will be real bonuses for our communities and for people across the country, particularly at the extremes of those communities, who perhaps suffer from loneliness, mental health illnesses and just being fractured from their own communities, and schools can help bring them in and support them. That would benefit the schools as well and the young people in them. So it is a tremendous opportunity, but it is one that has certainly not been realised and certainly is not part of a strategy at the moment.

Lord Mohammed of Tinsley: How are we going to communicate that to the head teacher who is basically looking at the balance sheet and asking, "If I lose one teacher, what are the consequences?" How do we change that?

Pepe Di'lasio: I certainly see that as our responsibility as a professional organisation. Our mission is to do our very best for young people, but also to support our members, and that speaks to the wider community. I see that as a professional responsibility that we have beyond our classrooms and beyond our schools.

Q23 **Baroness Watkins of Tavistock:** I just wanted to make a point of balance, really. What do you think about risk assessments and really young children? I do not want an answer, but I think the committee needs to think that through in whatever our response is. I declare my interest as a former community mental health nurse. I think that I would want to do a thorough risk assessment.

Jon Andrews: Can I come back on the point around opportunities? One of the things we have been thinking about is workforce deployment, not about individual schools but how the department manages its school workforce. We have a situation that you are all very familiar with: we have pupil numbers in primary falling, we are going to need fewer teachers. That is going to happen in secondary schools as well. But, at the moment, we are dealing with a population bulge in the post-16 sector—a sector that cannot attract good-quality teachers and has shortages there. Is there something the department can be doing to be thinking about it? Let us stop thinking. "You work in this part of the education system", and think, "Can we be moving people around a bit more or thinking about the opportunities that we can create for them to make that a valid career move?" I am not suggesting that being a primary school teacher is easily transferable to being a GCSE teacher or certainly into an FE college, but it is a potentially an opportunity, particularly when we are dealing with the uncertainty of what happens in 10 years' time. Pupil number projections are very difficult for the department to do, but historically, we have always had these peaks and troughs. One part of the system will have lots in it and potentially be over capacity, while elsewhere is dealing with the troughs. Are there things that we can do longer term to manage the fact that that will happen?

The Chair: Jenna, did you want to comment on that?

Jenna Julius: No. I just completely echo what Jon said there. We have had real challenges with teacher recruitment and retention. In a sense, that is a real opportunity here. One of the challenges, particularly when, when the full move into secondary eases some of those challenges, there are medium-term risks as well; for example, when we have fewer people moving through school, that is fewer people in the graduate labour market, so it is not going to solve teacher recruitment and retention challenges for ever. We should be conscious of that, but I would certainly echo that it will help ease some of those other pressures in the system in terms of staff recruitment.

On a couple of other things that colleagues have not mentioned, nursery provision, we know from our survey evidence, has been something that lots of primary schools have been looking at, I think not only as a means to redeploy their resources but very much seeing it as a way to attract pupils into the school and help cement their roles, which obviously is a zero sum. It is not going to solve all the problems across the system. But individual schools are certainly seeing it as a kind of way to help support their numbers in their schools and assure their viability in the longer term.

Q24 **Baroness Redfern:** Just looking at retention of teachers, would that help with mergers? How good are mergers with primary and senior schools? On spare capacity and losing teachers, if you have a merger, would that not help the recruitment and retention of teachers?

Jenna Julius: In theory I guess that is possible. Certainly, mergers typically tend to be multiple primary schools merging together rather than senior schools. The piece that Jon was alluding to about the fact that teaching in primary is very different is important.

Pepe Di'lasio: Anecdotally, I can say that where there have been cross-phase mergers, there has been the utilisation of specialist teachers from key stage 2 supporting with literacy and phonics and supporting cohorts of students in key stage 3—the secondary benefits from the specialism of the primary. There is anecdotal evidence of that. It certainly can work. We need to be careful because the challenge is that where there is a need for more capacity for recruiting and attracting more teachers, and where the teachers are available, do not often geographically combine very well. Perhaps we need to incentivise and ensure that we encourage those two to come together better. There are parts of the country that are real cold spots for attracting and recruiting teachers, and other parts which have excess teachers and people who are looking for jobs. We need to encourage ways in which we help that movement.

Baroness Redfern: I am thinking particularly rural areas.

Pepe Di'lasio: Absolutely.

Q25 **Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson:** We started this by saying that the DfE had not been proactive enough. To give credit to the DfE, this year we have seen some positive steps, and in the estate strategy at the

beginning of the year, it was talking about how to use additional capacity on the estate. In the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act, there are three key measures: Section 61, which places a duty on schools, including academies, to co-operate with local authorities; Section 62, which gives local authorities the power to direct academies to admit children in the same way it can with maintained schools; and Section 64, through which the Office of the Schools Adjudicator has the power to set a plan where it agrees with an objection. I would be grateful for your assessment of those measures, both the estate strategy and the measures in the Act that have just gone through. To what degree do you think they will help, and where might there still be gaps?

Jon Andrews: On the point about co-operation, we have long highlighted this issue whereby local authorities cannot direct academy trusts to reduce their admissions number. It potentially made maintained schools more vulnerable to closures. So we have welcomed the fact that there is the power in the Act. The proof is in the pudding of what happens here. We are talking about a dispute that potentially happens locally, then gradually gets escalated up to a schools adjudicator. Does it take a decision in time for that to work properly? I am not sure that we are confident on that. It comes back to Pepe's point earlier, which is around having someone with a more strategic sense of what is happening in the local area and making the decisions on that basis, rather than just thinking about this individual school case and how to address that.

Pepe Di'lasio: We welcome the Act and those elements within it. The jury is still out, to some degree, on how effective it will be, whether it will work quickly enough and whether the responsibilities of the adjudicator have enough levers within them to make the difference that is needed. I mentioned earlier the idea of an independent ombudsman, which could act more purposefully and look at a broader set of assessments that allowed it to come to a more nuanced, contextualised response in a local environment. That would be able to be done quicker and in the best interests of everyone. In terms of the aspirations of the Act, it is going in the right direction, and it has a number of elements within it that we think will help us move forward, just not necessarily as swiftly as I would want.

Jenna Julius: You can tell from my nodding that I echo everything that has been said.

Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson: Is there anything you think the department could be doing now to try to ensure that the Act has the effect it is hoping for?

Pepe Di'lasio: I am aware of a primary school that decided to close yesterday. This has happening right now, and I am not aware of the DfE and local authorities coming together in partnership to work effectively at the moment.

The Chair: That closure was based on the falling school roll rather than other circumstances?

Pepe Di'lasio: Yes. It was reported that several staff had left the school. The population in the school was half the target, and it was closed for that reason.

Baroness Redfern: They could not do mergers or anything like that? Was that looked at as an option?

Pepe Di'lasio: Unfortunately, in these situations, these schools enter a vicious circle, as I have described it, and they become less attractive to a potential merger. Just about everything stacks up against them, and the death of that school is almost inevitable.

Q26 **The Chair:** To bring this session to a conclusion, throughout your excellent evidence, you have indicated a number of priorities that you would like to see, perhaps ones we could recommend, even directly to the institutions involved. Could each of you encapsulate one key recommendation that you would like to see come out of our inquiry?

Jenna Julius: I am happy to go first. The point that I would like to reiterate, because a lot of other points have been made several times, is about this disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable pupils in our schools and, as Jon said, that is flying in the face of DfE's ambitions to close the disadvantage gap. If the right actions are not taken now, our most vulnerable pupils in terms of disadvantage and SEND are going to be impacted. Not only do we need a strategy behind this, but the strategy needs to consider the impacts on those groups.

Pepe Di'lasio: My one point would be around greater coherence between what the NHS knows about birth rates, what the DfE does to collect this data, what the local authorities hold and what the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government does to develop that strategy. We have probably all been involved in strategies in our time, and when there is no named person responsible for making sure that happens, we all know what tends to happen. I would be pushing for a named key decision-maker to be responsible for helping to make sure that it is delivered.

Jon Andrews: I agree with what has been said. We talked a bit about the uncertainty in pupil numbers and how that makes it difficult for local authorities and schools to be thinking about this. The other uncertainty they have is around what their funding is going to look like. We do not have long-term funding settlements for schools, and it is potentially something the Government can do to take one element of that uncertainty away. It is no good knowing exactly what our pupil numbers are going to look like in five years' time if the funding settlement you end up with looks completely different from what you expected.

Lord Barber of Chittlehampton: The evidence has been really helpful. I want to make an observation. Between you, you have many solutions. I urge you to go to the DfE and say, "We are solving it" rather than waiting for them to sort it out for you.

Pepe Di'lasio: Welcome to my world.

The Chair: Thank you for your time and for the helpful insights for the Committee.