



Public Services Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: Falling primary school rolls

Wednesday 1 July 2026

11.05 am

Watch the meeting

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

Evidence Session No. 3

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Questions 27 – 48

Witnesses

Georgia Gould OBE MP; Minister of State (Minister for School Standards), Department for Education; Alex Marsh, Director of School Analysis, System and Strategy, Department for Education; Anne Spinali, Director of Strategic Finance, Department for Education.

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Examination of witnesses

Georgia Gould, Alex Marsh and Anne Spinali.

Q27 The Chair: Welcome to this next session of witnesses for our short inquiry into falling primary school rolls. We are grateful for your time and that of your officials this morning. Would you like to introduce who you are?

Georgia Gould: We are delighted to be here. I am the Minister for School Standards.

Anne Spinali: I am the director of strategic finance of the department.

Alex Marsh: I am the director of schools analysis, system and strategy.

The Chair: You are all very welcome, and I will start the questioning. Primary school numbers have been decreasing since 2018-19, and look set to continually fall into the 2030s. Given that the national trend has been clear for a number of years, do you think your department is acting quickly enough to address the issue? Where is it on your priority list within the department?

Georgia Gould: Thank you so much for the question, Lord Bradley. As you have set out, this is a long-term and significant issue for the department. While it plays out differently in different parts of the country, and there are some areas where we are seeing primary school growth, the trend is very clear. It is something that this Government have acted very quickly to address.

My predecessor in the ministerial post came in alongside the Secretary of State and they introduced the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act, which had measures designed to act on this issue. The duty to co-operate between local authorities and schools around place planning and admissions is the most significant and critical. It is a function that local government leads on and has a statutory responsibility for, but it is really important that the Government are providing local authorities and schools with the tools they need to be able to address it.

The other significant measure in the Bill was the introduction of greater partnership and scrutiny of the role of PANs, so the ability to grow your school intake and make sure that there is an independent process to place planning in the area if it was set to cause real issues.

The other big themes in our support is how we fund resilience and planning for schools, so the lagged funding we put in place that gives schools time to adapt to changing school rolls, the increases we have made to the core school budget—outside the link to pupil numbers—to support schools, and the focus on sparsity that particularly supports rural schools, which we know have been impacted to a greater extent than other schools.

The other area we have acted swiftly on is to look at how we use those surplus places that have opened up in many schools. We have significant issues with support for special educational needs and disabilities. Many children travel long distances to get an education, so we have put £3.7 billion of capital investment into creating places with a real focus on inclusion bases linked to mainstream schools, working closely with local authorities to create those spaces. I have seen many examples where this has been done really well.

We have looked at the introduction of school-based nurseries and invested £400 million to put that support into local schools. It also enables and supports families to have children knowing that childcare is in place. This is something that we, as a Government, have taken very seriously. We really understand the pressures that it brings on schools, and it is something we are working closely with local authorities to address.

The Chair: That is a good opening position, and we will drill down into the issues that you have raised. Are you satisfied, at this point, that it is now of high priority within the department?

Georgia Gould: Yes, very much so. There is more work that needs to be done, and it is something that we will continue to look at, but it is very much a high priority for us.

Q28 **Lord Faulkner of Worcester:** Can I ask you how well served you are by local authorities in providing information to you? Are you getting good and regular reports from them on what the situation on falling school rolls is, and what do you do with the information when you get it?

Georgia Gould: Yes. We get really high-quality information from local authorities on falling rolls and on projections because it is critical that we understand if, in a particular area, it is a temporary reduction and we will see a growth in housing numbers so respond accordingly, or if it is a long-term trajectory that will allow us to support decision-making. Our regional teams work really closely with local authorities to ensure coherent planning around places. The information we get around rolls informs the funding we put in place. There are instances where some growth funding that we put in place is used to sustain schools during a blip in places where we know there is going to be long-term growth. Do you want to come in and talk in detail about how you use that data, Anne?

Anne Spinali: Yes. In terms of forecast accuracy, we obviously ask local authorities to give us some forecasts of how they are expecting pupil numbers to evolve. We collect that data through a survey, and we also validate it. There is a high degree of accuracy. The further you go into the future, the harder it is to predict. Using a number of methods, we check and assess how accurate local authorities have been in the past and therefore how much of a constructive challenge we can offer to their plans in the future. There is a high degree of accuracy for all local authorities, above 90%.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: There must be a variation in the quality and quantity of information you receive. Do you have a naughty step for local authorities that are not providing information to you?

Anne Spinali: Local authorities, through the survey mechanism, all respond to our request for information because it informs how we plan for capital funding allocations, as the Minister just set out, as well as revenue funding allocations. From time to time we have discussions about anomalies or things that are slightly surprising in the returns they are giving us, but on the whole I would not say that we have a list of local authorities that are on the naughty step.

Georgia Gould: We validate that information; that process is really important.

Q29 **Baroness Redfern:** I am so pleased you are here today. I am following on from Lord Faulkner. How often do you ask local authorities to respond to you?

Anne Spinali: The SCAP survey is done on an annual basis.

Baroness Redfern: It is on an annual basis, is it?

Anne Spinali: Yes, in order to inform how we—

Georgia Gould: As I was setting out earlier, the funding is lagged. We will fund on the basis of the survey from the October before in order to give schools essentially a year to respond. They might have seen a reduction in pupils in that year, so they will have the extra budget to make the necessary changes to be able to respond. It is deliberately creating a system where we have the information, but it gives schools that buffer to be able to respond. On top of that, local authorities have a pot of money they can use to support schools if they are seeing a high growth or a big reduction in rolls alongside the data that comes in.

The Chair: Do you think it is agile enough to reflect the circumstances within each year of unforeseen changes that may cause the school some financial difficulty? Are you agile enough to respond to that?

Georgia Gould: That is exactly why, on top of the core funding, we give local authorities a budget to be able to provide agile funding as needed—for example, if a large number of people move into an area or there is a sharp reduction. It gives them the space to be able to respond to that local picture. The long-term planning we do gives us a sense of how we expect things to change in the future.

Q30 **Lord Mott:** We talk about long-term planning. Often one criticism of Government is that their long-term plan is the Sunday newspapers. Is that five years? Is that 10 years? Dare I go beyond that, or is it a much shorter timeframe?

Anne Spinali: We have a number of planning horizons. As the Minister set out, our capital funding allocations are usually on a three, four, or five-year basis depending on the spending review settlement that we get.

When we allocated our high-needs capital allocation it was to 2029-30, to give a lot of visibility to local authorities as to how we are expecting them to plan.

We have also issued our basic needs allocations for two years, and we have told them already that we will issue our basic needs allocations in 2027 for the following two years. In terms of place planning, they have a planning horizon of about four to five years.

We have also published our education estate strategy. It is a 10-year strategy that has a number of themes relating to rebuilding and condition, retrofit and renewal, and all the changes we need to make in the estate. Obviously, we have annual discussions on the revenue funding side as well.

Q31 Lord Johnson of Marylebone: The evidence that we heard yesterday as a committee from heads contrasts very starkly with the assurances we have just had from you, Minister, with respect to the extent to which lagged funding and the money available to local authorities in any way provides a reasonable buffer to enable schools to adjust to the financial impact they are experiencing from falling rolls.

We heard from heads about the real financial stress they are under in many situations, and the extraordinary decisions they have to take in order to balance their books and remain financially afloat including laying off experienced staff, merging classes, expanding class sizes, and so on. The head teachers we heard from yesterday would challenge that lagged funding and that the money available to local authorities in any way comes close to mitigating the impacts they are experiencing.

What we heard from heads, in particular, was a request for three to five years of guaranteed funding in a cycle so that they can actually plan their financial affairs on a more sensible basis. Is that possible? What can be done to ensure that they have greater visibility as to their cash flows and an ability to manage their affairs in a sensible way?

Georgia Gould: Thank you for the question. My answer was about the agility year-to-year of the system. I absolutely recognise that the long-term reduction in pupil numbers places real stress on individual schools, and the challenges that come as a system in responding to that. In no way do I want to minimise the experience of heads who have to respond to those circumstances. I previously led a local authority that saw steeply declining pupil numbers, and I am aware of the difficult decisions that it entails within a school system.

The critical thing is to understand in a place what is happening and start making decisions around how you use space and how you plan across schools to respond to long-term trends when what is happening is clear. More is needed to be able to support local authorities and schools in doing that. That is why we have made changes through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act. There is a local duty to collaborate and a change in how we set published admission numbers to ensure there is proper place planning to understand how demographics are going, and

why we are developing a local decision-making framework. We will be bringing it out in the autumn, which will support places to make decisions around surplus places. It might be in an area where there has been a big reduction in pupil numbers but we know there is a real need for a particular kind of local SEND provision, so we can use that space to support the viability of that school to meet a need for local young people and that wider system. These are the kind of changes we want to put in place as well as putting a lot more support into schools and how they manage their budgets to get the best value from the money they have, such as changes to how we collectively buy energy, supply teacher frameworks, and banking comparison tools, all of which are supporting schools in these circumstances.

In terms of how we fund, a really important part of our funding system is that we are able to respond to need. The NFF has a lump sum element that goes to all schools. We have increased it, recognising some challenges we have just discussed but, as committee members will be aware, some money follows disadvantage, low prior attainment, and additional need. It is important that the additional needs that schools face are responded to, and that there is flexibility in the system to be able to respond. We are trying to create a balanced response to that need, but it is something that we continue to look at and recognise that local authorities and schools need support.

Lord Johnson of Marylebone: One of the complaints we heard from heads was that the Government are contributing towards instability—for example, by in-year cuts to budgets with items such as the sports premium being abruptly removed, with schools having little opportunity to adjust to that.

Georgia Gould: The sports premium and the changes we are making to sports are essentially a change in the model of delivery. We are putting £1 billion into the new model, which is a sports partnership at a local level. A lot of money has been going into supporting physical activity, but sadly we have not seen results in children and young people participating in physical activity. We are well off the recommended physical activity, particularly for disadvantaged young people, and there are huge inequalities. We want to make the most of that money, bringing it together at a local level to improve the offer for schools. The provision and the support will still be there, but it will be collectively delivered by working with national governing bodies, bringing in some local youth and community services to provide a stronger offer. We are supporting schools with some transitional funding as we move to that new model to enable them to plan for it.

We are developing something new so there is going to be uncertainty for schools, but we are really committed to working with them to make it work. Significant investment is going in that schools will feel within their local provision, whether that is access to coaching, swimming, or other sports and physical activities.

The Chair: Just on that point, the evidence we received from head

teachers is that money had been withdrawn without much notice. What is the timeframe for replacing that with this new money? How will it be allocated to give assurance that the consequences of the immediate withdrawal will be of very short-term impact? It did not seem to us yesterday that there was any recognition that alternative funding is on the way.

Georgia Gould: We are going out to procurement for a partner that will deliver the new partnership model. Once that procurement is completed, they will then start working around the local delivery plan in each area. Understandably for heads, as we procure and build the new model, they have not started those detailed conversations about what it will look like in their area. We expect that new model to be in place by the new year—after January—and, at the same time, we are continuing to fund the PE premium while we wait for the new model to be established.

The Chair: Has it not been withdrawn?

Georgia Gould: We are changing the way the money is spent.

The Chair: We were told yesterday that they have been told the money has been removed. For clarity, will that money not be removed until the new money flows through?

Georgia Gould: The PE premium will cease when the new model starts, but we are putting £1 billion into creating the PE and sports partnership. The money will still be going into the system; it is just going to be spent differently with the intention of improving things and working really closely with national partners. That is the shift. We will continue to fund schools directly with the PE premium until the new model is in place. We will do everything in our power to have a smooth transition between the PE premium model and the sports partnership. I absolutely recognise that in that transitional moment before the new model is up and running, it is causing anxiety. I have a real commitment to work with heads to ensure that they understand what is coming and are a part of building that new model. I do not know if there is anything you want to add, Anne?

Anne Spinali: No, that transition element is key.

Q32 **Baroness Nichols of Selby:** To expand on that, it is not clear to them what is happening. I took away from yesterday that the money had already gone. That is what we all felt. Like all organisations, communication is key. They may have it wrong, or maybe it is wrong in any case.

The other bit on that was the plea, and you have covered some of it around the longer-term impact of this, particularly around the falling rolls Lord Johnson mentioned to you. I took away that each local authority seems to be doing something different, and that is where there is a link. An example from yesterday is that some outer London boroughs are paying the inner allowance, but some inner boroughs are paying the outer allowance, which is not consistent with pay and things. It was really confusing. While people do not like to be directed in local authorities,

there might be some thought given to that. It is a bit like the pupil premium and the differences around that. People do not understand why it is different when you have a SEND pupil in London who gets X amount, and you have somebody in North Yorkshire, where I am from, who gets much less. That is what we were picking up on yesterday as well.

Georgia Gould: I take the point on communication around the PE and sports partnership. We will take that away. We have written to all schools but, from this conversation and others, we need to be much clearer about the investment that is going in and the opportunities of a new partnership, which is designed to improve access to sports. Thank you for that challenge.

In terms of inconsistency, this is a critical point and there are inconsistencies in a number of areas. SEND provision is one area in which we see a huge postcode lottery. I spent the last year travelling around the country talking to teachers, families and young people, and I heard this directly. The changes we are making to the SEND system are designed to deal with this and create new national inclusion standards that will have minimum expectations for all schools, creating specialist provision packages that will essentially set out a standard for specialist provision, and the commissioning asked for by local authorities around that specialist provision.

We are clear, and we have just published guidance on inclusion bases, that we want every primary and secondary school to have an inclusion base, and we have changed accountability to have that clarity around inclusion.

We also want to see greater consistency in funding. The vast majority of local authorities use the national funding formula as we set out nationally, but not all. We want to move to a direct national funding formula—we will consult on this—that will be consistent everywhere in the country. We are also developing the local decision-making framework to support local authorities in how they make decisions about surplus place, the areas we want them to be looking at, whether that is inclusion bases, nurseries, or wider services for families. One of our big ambitions is to start wrapping more support around schools, whether that is our new experts-at-hand service, education psychologists, speech and language therapists, or whether that is our family-first early intervention. These are some areas we are looking at to deal with inconsistency, while recognising that each area of the country has different challenges and local authorities are best placed to make decisions around their local place planning.

Q33 **Baroness Redfern:** Schools talked about after-school clubs and reduced trips out yesterday because of cash problems. Sport is important too, and you mentioned the PE premium at £1 billion. Is that more or less than they are receiving now?

Georgia Gould: I will start with the issue of trips and enrichment. This is a massive issue and we see real inequality in terms of children's access to

enrichment. We have just published an enrichment framework that sets out our expectation for all schools on the enrichment offer that children will have access to. It includes sports, arts, civic education, outdoor education, and life skills. We are backing that with two pieces of investment. For the 400 most disadvantaged schools, we are working with DCMS to put £22.5 million into building out the offer. To support the wider enrichment framework, we have aligned with DCMS on its dormant asset funding, which is over £100 million, to support the same aims. We are bringing together external funding to support schools to deliver the enrichment framework that opens up those opportunities. It sits outside the PE premium. The £1 billion will overall be more than has been invested previously, but the ask of that money will also be primary and secondary schools. So it will be asked to—

Baroness Redfern: Are you saying that it is going to be spread wider?

Georgia Gould: It is going to be spread wider, but we want to—

Baroness Redfern: Technically, primary are not going to get as much then.

Georgia Gould: In practice, we hope they will get more in terms of provision. Each school at the moment gets a small sliver of money that they have to try to spend. What we are going to do in the new system is collectively spend that money in an area, look at the offer, and build it up across the schools, because we found that physical activity has not been increasing. Despite the best efforts of primary schools, it is not being spent in the most efficient way to support physical activity. In terms of provision, it is a really significant investment so we expect it to deliver more. I do not know if you want to say anything about the numbers just to make sure that we are absolutely clear, Anne?

Anne Spinali: I was going to add something on the numbers that now include a large element of capital funding to support either the refurbishment or the development of a new sports field, particularly in areas where they do not exist. That means you avoid primary schools having to travel quite far in order to get access to sporting facilities, which some unfortunately have to do, and therefore allow a greater footprint for sporting facilities and access for a number of primary schools.

Baroness Redfern: I was not talking about that sort of cash. I still say that primary schools are getting less money. You are talking about capital; I am talking about—

Anne Spinali: The revenue funding has, as the Minister set out, been split more broadly across primary and secondary. Some primary schools will see a reduction.

Baroness Redfern: It was a real concern for our head teachers yesterday because—

Georgia Gould: I completely understand their concern because they have been used to a certain model. There was previously a sports partnership model such as this that worked really well. It had less money but delivered really strong outcomes. This is something that many national governing bodies and sports organisations have called for because we have seen a quite disjointed service. Despite a lot of money going in, we have not seen the outcome or activity that we might expect. Being able to spend that money at a place level means you build up those coaches and provision to enable that quite significant investment to spread further. We expect provision and activity to go up. This is a new model; we are building it out. That is very much the intention behind it. I just want to acknowledge that we are asking for that money to be spread further, and the model will enable that to happen.

Q34 **Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson:** To summarise, and I hope I have understood it properly, you are saying that individual heads will no longer have this slice of cash for PE but the new money going on PE will be the same or greater. It is just spent at place level rather than at school level. Is it the same or is it greater?

Anne Spinali: It is the same. It is the same overall when you aggregate it.

Georgia Gould: Go through the numbers.

Anne Spinali: It is £1 billion across three years. The amount that we were previously putting in the PE and sports premium—it is not just DfE; a number of other government departments are contributing as well—will then be put into the new model on a three-year basis, so about £330 million. Depending on the profile of what we manage to secure through the contract, it will probably—

Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson: If you are a head, it looks like your budget has gone down. If you are a child, your experience, we hope, is going to be that as much money is invested in your PE.

Georgia Gould: Yes.

The Chair: Are you confident that it can all be in place by January before the money is withdrawn from the current premium?

Georgia Gould: Yes. What is the date that it ends, Anne?

Anne Spinali: We are targeting the first quarter of the new year.

Georgia Gould: Yes. It is predicated on building up this new model before the premium ends. We want a seamless transition between the two models, which is why we put this transitional PE premium in to enable schools to continue funding before we open up the new model.

The Chair: Could you send the committee details of the funding, the timeline, and how you expect that money to be better spent in the way you are describing?

Georgia Gould: I will, yes.

Baroness Pidgeon: What is capital and revenue? Are we comparing like with like?

Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson: Implied in what you have said, although you have not been explicit about it, is that heads may not have been using this money directly for PE. It may have been spread a little more widely across a school and used in lots of different ways. Therefore, this dedicated funding is problematic. If you have been using your PE premium at the margin for a couple of other things, losing it is problematic. For the child, the hope is that it is more resource into PE.

Georgia Gould: It is very hard for an individual school to use a small slice of money to build up a holistic offer, to use it for five different sports, or a range of different activities that you might want a child to have. However, at a place area you can ensure that there is a dance, hockey, or rugby offer that links across or a set of coaches that work with different schools. It is a much more efficient way to use the money.

In conversations and the evidence we have from when there was a previous partnership model, it worked better than this PE premium. It is not a criticism of schools at all. It was a model that did not work that well for funding PE, and the greatest evidence for that is the stagnation we have seen in outcomes and the depth of the inequalities we have seen. We have developed this new model in order to support and improve outcomes. That is the only reason we have done it. Physical activity is a massive priority for the Government. The enrichment offer on top of it is all about creating a partnership model that really works on the ground. We have huge buy-in from national organisations to support this.

The other thing we hope it will support is inclusion. We fund something called Inclusion 2028, which is a partnership that includes Paralympics, GB, and others to train up PE teachers and others to support inclusive PE. That partnership will enable a different model.

I have heard that concern from heads. I understand that the shift is going to be very worrying when it had been in their budget, but there is a significant investment going in long-term. I hope that they will see more provision for their children as a result of that investment.

Q35 **Baroness Watkins of Tavistock:** I am just a bit concerned about rural schools. I have heard what you have said, but I live in a rural area. Our local primary school has a relationship with the cricket club that is absolutely brilliant. Are we saying that things like that have to go because it is going to be place-based for the local authority?

Georgia Gould: Can you say that again?

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock: I am not sure how that will continue to be purchased because I know that, in this instance, the primary school head has formed a really good relationship. The cricket club is literally like, "Our building to yours". It is an ideal model but if the money is going

centrally to Tavistock rather than a small—

Georgia Gould: I see.

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock: Do you see where I am coming from?

Georgia Gould: Yes. The idea is that, at a partnership level, local heads will be part of designing that model. The reason why that has not started is because we are still in the commissioning arrangements as to how it will look. If there are existing relationships, we would like to build on them. If that partnership is strong, it might be that the cricket club could also provide support for another two schools locally and we could grow the impact of those individual partnerships. Part of the reason why we are careful about that transition is we know there are local partnerships, local coaches and local practices that might be helping one school that, in a wider model, could potentially help other schools. We have been really clear in how we set it out. We need to ensure that rural schools that do not have many schools close to them still get that provision. It is a really important point and, as we develop the new contract and model, we will be looking at all these issues. I am very happy to take recommendations because it is an evolving model.

Q36 **Lord Mohammed of Tinsley:** I just want to add, Minister, that yesterday head teachers told us that at the beginning of the year they set a balanced budget and now they are staring down a deficit. Any clarity that you can provide would be greatly appreciated.

My question, not surprisingly, is still around funding but it is actually around the funding formula. Given that the national funding formula finances schools predominantly on the basis of pupil numbers, does the DfE believe it is fit for purpose against a backdrop of falling pupil numbers?

Georgia Gould: As I said when answering Lord Johnson's question, we have a lump sum element in the funding formula that protects all schools at their base. We have increased that, recognising the pressures that schools face. As a result of the work we are doing on needs, the NFF funds on a whole host of measures including pupil numbers and extra funding for a range of needs that we know require more support. We have a significant disadvantage gap. We have talked about the huge challenges in the special educational needs and disability system. It is important that the money addresses some of those challenges and goes to teaching the pupils in schools. A lagged funding system enables that time for schools to be able to respond to any annual changes in rolls. We do not have any plans to change the nature of the funding formula. As I said earlier, we will be moving to a direct NFF and we will be consulting on the future NFF. These are all issues that we will keep under consideration.

Lord Mohammed of Tinsley: When will you be consulting?

Georgia Gould: We do not have a set time, but we have set out that we will be moving to it.

Lord Mohammed of Tinsley: Next year or the year after?

Georgia Gould: Yes.

Lord Mohammed of Tinsley: Next year?

Anne Spinali: Yes.

Lord Mohammed of Tinsley: The financial year?

Anne Spinali: Yes, the financial year. We have to put out the national funding formula for 2027-28 in the autumn to allow schools to plan. We will have to follow that.

Q37 **Lord Mott:** I am afraid I am following a similar theme on funding, which will not surprise you. I am particularly interested in almost the cliff edge examples we were given yesterday by head teachers. The department allocated £27 million in 2024 to the falling rolls funding. The National Audit Office estimates that the loss in per pupil funding could see schools lose £280 million in 2027. The committee has heard that the eligibility criterion for the fund is disqualifying many schools experiencing falling rolls. Do you think the scale of the falling rolls fund matches the scale of the financial challenges caused by those falling rolls?

Georgia Gould: As I set out, the falling rolls funding is not the only lever by which we support schools. The lagged funding system is a really important one and gives that year to plan. It is absolutely true that schools have to plan for reducing numbers, and that can be a very difficult process for schools. We are putting in as much support as we can to provide data of comparative schools. I talked about the work we are doing around maximising value, but there are changes that they need to make. Sometimes that might be merging schools or changes to their structure. It is one of the key protective factors, as well as that falling roll funding.

In general, we would like to see local authorities planning with schools, based on their demographic projections, on how they create the right system to be able to support a sustainable number of schools and allow school resilience. In some circumstances, it might mean changing the number of schools; it might mean creating other uses within schools to support their viability, such as inclusion bases. These are the proactive plans that we want local authorities to be putting in place to create a long-term, sustainable picture. When you take evidence from them, I think local authorities would say they have felt that they have not sometimes had the levers to be able to bring all schools together to create those plans. That is why the changes in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act are so important: the focus on the duty to co-operate and the changes to how PAN—published admission number—operates, which means that you can put in a challenge if a school is growing and puts other schools at risk. Local authorities are able to put in a challenge under the new system, and the independent adjudicator can make a final judgment. The first set of those powers has just vested in the last few days on—

Anne Spinali: On the duty to co-operate.

Georgia Gould: Yes, on the duty to co-operate, and the others are coming. These are new levers being put in place to support schools to respond to future challenges.

Q38 **Baroness Nichols of Selby:** I want to change a little from funding, you will be pleased to know, but I might throw a bit in anyway. We have obviously heard issues around schools that are in deprived areas of the country. They seem to face more risk of falling rolls, not just because of the birth rate and other things; they are likely to be failing because of where the school is. What assessment has the department done around that issue? What do you think the department can do to protect disadvantaged pupils who are often also in areas of deprivation? Sometimes people feel that deprivation is in the inner cities, but there is certainly deprivation in many rural areas as well that people do not feel get the same kind of coverage.

Georgia Gould: There is a lot in that. We have huge gaps for disadvantaged pupils. One of our big missions as a Government is to address those significant gaps and put in more support for children who face disadvantage to make sure they are meeting their potential.

Disadvantage is one factor that is accounted for through the NFF, ensuring that more funding is going to the schools that see more disadvantage. We also have the pupil premium, which we have increased in order to support disadvantaged pupils. We have committed to do more work on how we support and fund disadvantaged young people. It is a huge priority for us.

Access to high-quality teaching and leadership is absolutely critical to supporting pupils' outcomes. We have incentives in place to support leaders in disadvantaged areas to have more support and to direct teachers to those areas, or to encourage teachers to go to those areas.

You are absolutely right: we have seen, in the analysis we have done, that there are likely to be higher surpluses in schools that have a higher number of disadvantaged pupils. It is hard to say the causality around that. It could be that there is a greater surplus because those schools are struggling and parent choice means fewer parents are going to those schools. It is an area we have committed to do more work on. It was a recommendation in the NAO's report, and we are going to look in more depth at this particular challenge. Alex, is there anything you want to add on that?

Alex Marsh: Starting from the top with our objectives, we are really committed to driving up attainment for all children. The schools White Paper sets out a long-term ambition for us to keep improving average attainment at key stage 4 but then, in particular, a real focus on the disadvantage gap with the ambition to halve it at key stage 4. That will take some time.

The time horizon for that ambition set out in the schools White Paper is that we get there by the time children born under this Government reach key stage 4. In the meantime, and given the focus of this inquiry, we have a really fierce focus on primary. We are really committed to continuing to drive up attainment at key stage 2, both average attainment and, critically, narrowing the disadvantage gap.

On how we are doing against that, we have seen encouraging improvement on overall average attainment at key stage 2. We have seen continued recovery since the pandemic. The proportion of children meeting the expected standard of reading, writing, and maths at key stage 2 in 2022 was 59%. It has steadily increased. We have just seen the highest year-on-year increase; it has reached 62%. Obviously, we need to sustain that.

As the Minister has said, we have a particular area of concern and focus on disadvantage. We are not seeing the same catching up in the equivalent figure for disadvantaged children, which is 47%. We did not see the same increase in the last year.

It is worth also saying that there is a connection here to our agenda and our focus on special educational needs because that is where we see the biggest gap by far. The proportion of children with SEND reaching the expected standard increased slightly, but still only from 22% to 24%. We really need a lot of focus on that.

That then effectively becomes, it is fair to say, the galvanising focus for our overall plan for schools. We have a range of measures, many of which are set out in the schools White Paper, all about tackling that.

In addition to the point around incentives for high-quality leaders in deprived areas and the point around making best use of disadvantage funding, I would also emphasise the two place-based missions that we announced in the schools White Paper and have said more about recently. This is to recognise your point that schools in areas of high deprivation face a common set of challenges; some may be to do with falling rolls. Evidence published by the NFER in April this year suggests that there is a high proportion of disadvantaged children in schools that see falling rolls.

In all parts of the country and irrespective of rolls, in many respects schools in disadvantaged areas face particular challenges. The philosophy of the mission-based approach is to recognise that a lot of those challenges are in common. We have taken some areas that have particularly high levels of deprivation and poor outcomes, and we are building on some of the ingredients of success of previous school improvement programmes, taking educational experts and building a collaborative approach. We are bringing together strong schools, schools that are struggling and educational experts in an area in order to essentially take an experimental test, learn and grow approach to see what works and then aim to scale it.

We are going to start with a couple of coastal areas because we know they have particular challenges, Scarborough and Hastings, and we are going to look at some areas in the north-east because we know that is the area with the lowest overall outcomes.

Georgia Gould: The only thing I would add is that, when we talk about tackling the disadvantage gap, what happens in schools and education is critical but the wider support for families is equally important. I would be interested to know whether heads said that. I hear all the time that some infrastructure that supported them has been pulled away, so we are trying to build back that support, whether it is Best Start hubs that focus on early intervention, early help for families that are having issues, or the extension of free school meals for children on universal credit and the end to the two-child benefit cap. These are all areas that help with the wider issues around disadvantage and support families but also create a team around schools to help them address these challenges.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: On that point, we heard from head teachers yesterday that, when they had disadvantaged children in their schools and a falling roll, other parents then withdrew their children and sent them elsewhere. What can be done to stop that?

Georgia Gould: The real focus needs to be on ensuring that all schools are getting support to provide that high-quality education. It links to some place planning elements and ensuring that there are not excessive surplus places in an area, putting lots of schools at risk. One of the levers we want local authorities to have is to be able to respond to challenges and ensure that there is the right number of places in a local area.

In terms of those patterns around disadvantage, surplus places and what is actually happening in those areas, it is something we have committed to do more work on.

- Q39 **Baroness Hollins:** The aspiration to help schools to grow their role as a community hub to support communities is really important, but it seems as though there might be a delay in schools being able to do that and funding challenges along the way. I should declare an interest because a charity I founded and chair, Books Beyond Words, has done some work with schools in Barnsley. They talk about pupil attainment being linked to the relationships they have with families locally, building those relationships and connections locally. If the schools close and the children are taken to schools some distance away, the potential for providing that ongoing continuity of relationship with families, which they have found has built attainment, is lost.

Georgia Gould: You can move quite swiftly to look at those other uses. I used to be a council leader and we had an instance where a school had become really unviable. We merged that school with another and started to wrap family support around the school using the surplus place. We were able to move quite quickly in order to provide continuity of education and those wider family services. These are options that are available, as are others that we talked about such as inclusion bases and

nurseries. This is money that is already in the system. The first two flows of capital investment have gone into local authorities. As I travel around the country, I know that local authorities are talking to schools about developing inclusion bases at the moment. One of the real advantages of that investment is that it is much quicker to set up a high-quality inclusion base—we now have really strong guidance—than to build a new special school, so it provides much-needed capacity quicker for special educational needs and disabilities.

We are leading a massive expansion of childcare and school-based nurseries. Schools are taking up this offer, and that money is in the system. More broadly, we have a significant capital investment going into schools. There are real opportunities for schools and local authorities. We are building up those services around schools. We have invested in Best Start hubs that are going into local authorities. There are opportunities for Best Start hubs to be delivered in school settings where they do not already exist. We are investing in families first partnerships, supporting that early help back into communities but linked to schools, and the experts-at-hand service, the educational psychologists and specialists who will need space within schools. There is investment going into the system that can create new uses for spaces within schools.

Q40 **Baroness Pidgeon:** I want to move on to managing changing demand. We have had evidence from schools and admissions authorities that they really feel they are lacking direction, guidance and support from the department. In fact, our early evidence from the National Audit Office talked about how this issue of falling places had not been on the department's risk register until very recently. You have mentioned a local decision-making framework you are working on for the autumn. Can you talk us through how that is being developed, who is engaged with it, how it is going to support the sector and how you are drawing on learnings from across the country, which we heard so clearly yesterday, rooting it in real evidence of what works in very different circumstances?

Georgia Gould: When we came into power, we recognised that there was a gap in some of the powers and levers that local authorities had to be able to really plan for falling rolls. That was why we brought in some of the measures that I have talked about around the pupil admission numbers and that duty to co-operate. They were responding to a clear need in the system, and we hope that that is going to really back local authorities in their critical duty around sufficiency.

Baroness Hollins was asking about how we think about surplus spaces and how we make these kinds of decisions, especially when we always have to balance a sustainable system in the short term with making sure that we have enough capacity in the system if pupil numbers grow again. These are not easy decisions, so that is exactly what we want the local decision-making framework to do: set out the real priorities from government for how you use spaces, how you make decisions about whether they are long-term uses or meanwhile spaces, how you make decisions around conflicting interests and very much learning from the best practice that is happening around the system.

Baroness Pidgeon: Do you have any examples of that best practice that you are looking to? Are there any particular areas that are doing things very well that you think you can learn from?

Georgia Gould: I have seen a lot of real thinking about this where local authorities are looking at clusters of schools, providing support that sits across those different schools—the different inclusion bases, such as school-based nurseries and Best Start hubs—and thinking about that place picture, rather than looking at it on a school-by-school basis.

Another thing I have talked less about is the ambition we have set in the schools White Paper that schools will be part of trusts going forward. This is a long-term direction of travel that we are setting for schools. There is something really important about schools that are quite isolated and financially unsustainable on their own potentially coming together in trusts that give a bit more resilience to the school system. That is another area that our regional partnerships will be working on.

Baroness Pidgeon: I wrote down when you mentioned earlier, and you mentioned it again just now, “There are many examples of what works well that I have seen”. You have talked generally but I would like us to go away and do some more work on it, so specifically where in the country have you seen something that you thought worked well?

Georgia Gould: South Gloucestershire has a really established cluster model; I was there recently. It says it is not a well-funded local authority, comparatively, so I know that it is doing work.

I was in Hackney recently—central London has a real challenge—and it has been incredibly thoughtful about surplus places and doing work around SEND, inclusion bases and specialist schools. It has thought really long-term about that shift, so that is a really brilliant example. We can definitely provide a list of where we think it is really working.

Baroness Pidgeon: That will be useful for us, if there are some that are really shining for you that we could look at.

Anne Spinali: To build on that, my team and I have been around the country, and we are going to continue that over the summer, to develop that local decision-making framework. We are speaking to local authorities, schools, trusts and dioceses. We recently went to Bristol, for instance, which is doing a lot of work around how it manages emerging surplus places, and in particular the boundary issues that it is facing with other local authorities as well.

We have visits planned to Dorset, Durham, Westmorland and Furness and Cornwall, looking at how they are managing the changing demands as well as some of the local pressures that are emerging, which are some of the issues that we are having to deal with as well. In building that local decision-making framework, we will be talking to all those stakeholders and testing the draft framework with them because we want to make sure it is responsive to what they need us to help them with.

Baroness Pidgeon: From your work so far, South Gloucestershire, Hackney and Bristol are where we might want to look—is that correct?

Georgia Gould: Yes. We will send you a note on what we think are the best ones. Those are the ones that I remember as I travel around the country, but it is different models.

Baroness Pidgeon: Your instinct when you visit is important.

Georgia Gould: The other place that is doing something really interesting that I visited recently is York. It has thought really carefully about how its clusters, its range of family support, sit around schools. It has four clusters and it is looking at all the different kind of investments, whether that is mental health support teams, experts at hand or Best Start hubs, and a co-ordinated approach that sits around clusters of schools. That is another place that you might want to look at.

The Chair: It will be a long tour.

Georgia Gould: Sorry, yes.

Q41 **Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson:** To come back to you, Anne, it is great to hear that you are working so closely with local authorities to develop something that they need. Can you tell us a little more about what it is they need? Is this framework going to be essentially a decision tree that sets out, "These are the five things you should think about", and it takes you through a set of decisions and at the end it pops out that, "You should have a school-based nursery", or "You should have experts at hand", or "You are perfectly placed for a Best Start Family Hub"? How much guidance is there? Does it say, "These are the things to trade off; let me walk you through how to make a decision", versus a general, "These are all the options and you should think about what option suits your area best"?

Anne Spinalli: You are absolutely right to be asking that question. That is what we want to hear from local authorities as well in terms of what they need. At the moment we are envisaging it being very clear about what the departmental priorities are that we want local authorities to be addressing and tackling. The Minister talked about tackling disadvantage, and obviously additional needs is one of our key priorities.

It is also about navigating how you then make decisions. At the moment we are envisaging it more as, "How do you identify what the trade-offs are going to be in your local area to support good decision-making? Can we signpost you to examples of best practice that you might want to look at that might be suitable for your area?" That is how we are currently envisaging developing it. We will obviously be iterating that over the summer and talking to local authorities as to whether that is going to work for them, or whether we need to be a bit more descriptive and high level in order to allow them to make their own decisions.

Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson: Will you as the department be trying to inject a view? For example, we have talked about inclusion hubs. Will you

use this as guidance that is prescriptive to them, to make sure that if there is not an inclusion hub there must be an inclusion hub? Is this a mechanism for achieving some departmental objectives as well, or is it just supporting local areas to make the best decisions for themselves?

Georgia Gould: That is interesting. I do not think we envisioned it as this being the means by which we drove through our policy on inclusion. We are developing other mechanisms, such as the national inclusion standards and the changes to accountability. That is a really helpful challenge and something to think about, because we have set out very clear ambitions on inclusion bases, for example.

When we are talking about inclusion bases, we are talking about two types of spaces. We are calling one specialist bases, and they will be commissioned by the local authority to deliver specialist support. They might have a particular focus around the new specialist provision packages and in those cases we would envision that children would spend most of their time within the specialist bases, although of course we always want to support integration within the mainstream school. That is one of the purposes of having them linked to mainstream schools, but they would be commissioned specialist provision.

The other is a support base that we would expect to be something that schools develop from within that school or across a number of schools through school budgets. We are putting more money into school budgets through the inclusion mainstream fund to support the development of support bases. Those would be spaces where you would expect to see more intervention happening. That is where you might have speech and language, small group activity, educational psychologists working with a group of children, a space to re-regulate, a sensory space, potentially a nurture group on a transition from primary to secondary. It would be a more temporary space for support. When we are talking about inclusion bases, it covers those two different ways of thinking about space.

The Chair: Are you confident that all the partners in that, the local authorities and the schools, can work in a co-ordinated way and have the capacity to actually come to conclusions about that provision, in the timeframes that you are suggesting?

Georgia Gould: Yes, in the timeframes we have said. We are not confident right now that everyone has the capacity that they need to do this work.

We are putting £4 billion into early intervention on SEND, but £200 million of that is going into extra capacity for local authorities to do exactly this kind of convening and place planning. We do not think all the partnerships are as strong as they need to be to develop this new model, but we are deliberately taking time to build up the new system. At the moment we are projecting that it will not come fully into place until 2030.

We have just finished a consultation—a lot of what I am saying is subject to consultation—but the investment is going in now. We are putting £1.8

billion into the experts-at-hand service over three years. That new service will start from September. We are putting £1.6 billion into what we call the inclusion mainstream fund, which is money directly into schools for inclusion, and that money is starting to go directly into schools' budgets this year. We are putting £200 million into training teachers, support staff and school leaders around inclusion because it is a new way of thinking about things.

As part of the model around SEND, we will be asking schools to work in local clusters. Some of the money that in the new system will go directly to schools we expect them to hold at the group of schools level to invest across those different schools, to ensure that in an area they are meeting the full needs of those children. We will expect them to be working with the local authority at that cluster level to think about the nature of the inclusion bases they need, and ensuring there is the right range of provision. We often see that an area might have a provision for a group of children but actually another group is having to travel large distances. The new system is much more rooted in partnerships between all types of schools and the local authority.

This is something that we expect to build up, but we have asked every local authority to develop a SEND reform plan, and we have had the first draft back from them all. We have asked them to work across schools, health and other partners to develop these reform plans and, where we are more concerned about what we are seeing, we are putting in extra support and challenge in order to ensure they are of a sufficient quality. We will be monitoring really carefully some of the key data points that will tell us about the system readiness. There has been a data gap, and at the moment we do not have knowledge about how many inclusion bases there are in the system, for example, or the number of speech and language therapists that each local authority has, so this new data collection exercise is really important.

Many local authorities are in deficit at the moment as a result of some of the historic SEND issues. We are supporting them with 90% of those deficits, but we have been really clear that the extra money we are giving them is contingent on them having a really credible plan on these issues. This is a massive focus because it is a huge shift we need to make. We are being really proactive in the support we give to local authorities and schools, but also the challenge.

Q42 Baroness Redfern: I just want to just focus a little on the mixed-age classes. How are you ensuring that decisions made in response to falling rolls are not compromising education outcomes for pupils? That is particularly important for parents. If there are the same outcomes, parents will keep their children at that school. Do you have any analysis that attainment is not suffering?

Georgia Gould: The analysis that we have at the moment suggests that there is not a link between falling rolls and a reduction in attainment, but we have some data that suggests that those schools in some areas with lower outcomes also have falling rolls. We do not have any causality

around that, but it is something that we need to look into and really understand as part of the work that we have committed to on the back of the NAO report.

This is really critical in terms of the decision-making because, for example, we have a presumption to protect rural schools or to keep rural schools open. We will seek to do that wherever possible, but if it becomes clear that the numbers are so small that they are detrimentally impacting the education of those pupils and the viability of that school, there will be some circumstances where, if there are local schools available, the best thing might actually be for that school to close and to support pupils into transitioning to other schools. So the presumption is to protect in all circumstances, but obviously we will keep a close eye on the outcomes for children in making those decisions.

Baroness Redfern: Reaching their attainment is so important.

Georgia Gould: Absolutely. Do you want to comment on the attainment issue, Alex?

Alex Marsh: Yes, I do. You have summarised what the evidence does and does not tell us really clearly. The published evidence and also our intuition, I am sure you have heard, tells us that when falling rolls happen it absolutely means that head teachers need to make difficult decisions around staffing or about enrichment offer. There is also clear evidence that we see a greater proportion of disadvantaged children in schools facing those falling rolls challenges.

However, when we look at the level of attainment and the level of surplus, we see a correlation between high attainment and lower surplus, lower attainment and higher surplus, as the Minister said. We do not know exactly why; of course it could be that parents see the lower attainment, the lower outcomes, and choose not to send their children to that school. There is more for us to do to really unpack what this looks like at a local level and at a school level. That is the approach that we intend to take in terms of digging into this further.

In terms of how we ensure that the decisions made always foreground outcomes for children, the Minister has talked about closure decisions. I just wanted to add that we have mentioned the powers taken in the Act around PANs and it is important to emphasise that decisions made around which schools should expand or which ones should shrink absolutely have to take into account parental preference and quality. When we look at this new backstop power that we have introduced, if a local authority objects to a decision to increase a published admissions number, for example, it needs to take into account parental preference and quality. So at every stage of the decision-making process this is about working out, at a system level, what is going to deliver the best outcomes for the children in an area.

Q43 **Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson:** I want to just follow-up a little about that new co-operation duty on schools and the powers for local

authorities in managing school admissions. I have two questions for you, actually. First, how do you envisage these new powers working in practice? Do you have a sense of the platonic ideal of how this is going to work? If you are in an area with falling rolls, what is now going to be possible for the local authorities that previously was not?

Secondly, there is inevitably some trade-off on parental choice and on allowing good schools to carry on expanding; it would just be good to have a word from you on where you see the trade-offs. It is never possible to do anything in public policy; you have to make trade-offs. How do you see those trade-offs forming?

Georgia Gould: As you will know, many academies, schools and faith schools are their own admission authorities at the moment, and the local authority has the duty around sufficiency. That has sometimes meant that all the partners are not totally coming together to look at what is in the best interest of the place because, of course, everyone is thinking about the sustainability of their own institutions. That duty to co-operate is really critical to bring everyone around the table to look at these common challenges. It might be that there are some schools that would reduce their roll in order to support the viability of the wider school system. We would hope that that would be done co-operatively; through that new duty everyone will know that we are taking that very seriously and will come to the table.

If that co-operation is not happening, our regional teams can intervene to push that locally, but of course these new powers that Alex was just talking about mean that, if there is a real dispute, there is somewhere to go. If a local authority thinks a school should reduce its roll and there is disagreement from that school, the independent adjudicator can make that final decision, and that backstop will, I hope, enable people to come together to make decisions. In making those decisions quality is really paramount. As Alex said, we do not want to restrict the choice of parents or to prevent good schools from growing, but if there are circumstances where that growth is going to really detrimentally impact other schools and other pupils, then you have to make those trade-offs and an independent adjudicator will be there to support decision-making in those circumstances.

At the same time there will be a lot of resource put into improving schools that are struggling, and that is another part of the picture of the reforms we are wanting to bring forward. It essentially allows people to really plan for the future: how many schools are needed in an area for the short-term, but also the long-term. Then, if there is a surplus space that we think we are going to need long term, what are the different uses we can make of that space?

Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson: How much guidance are you going to give the independent adjudicator on how to weigh up those trade-offs? An example that Baroness Watkins has made us think about before is when there is a school that is not financially viable any more, but the school and the local community want it to stay open, and its closure

would mean long travel times. In that instance, how is the independent adjudicator supposed to weigh up parental and community support for the school with children's travel times? There are just a lot of trade-offs.

Georgia Gould: They would not make the decision on the school closure. That would be on published admission numbers. So that would be more if there was a school that was going to grow or reduce its numbers.

In terms of whether a school should stay open or not it depends on what type of school it is. If it was an academy they would be responsible for taking forward a proposition to close that school, and there is a process that they need to go through in terms of local consultation, but also in conversation with the department, and ultimately the Minister will look at those decisions.

The trade-offs that we would look at in those circumstances are exactly the trade-offs that we just discussed. We have a presumption to support rural schools—it is built into our formula in terms of the sparsity factor—but if there is strong evidence from the local authority, the trust and the community that the school is really suffering in terms of its educational outcomes, and that there is very little chance of that school growing again because of the local demographics and it is hard to see viability, then you might make the decision to close that school. However, if that school was the only school in quite a large distance you might actually need to review that decision. So those are the things we would look at; then there is a separate process if a local authority wants to close a school.

But in terms of the duty to co-operate and asking partners to come together, it is that planning around admissions numbers, around the number of schools you need in an area and around how you might transition provision within a school that needs more specialist provision. Those are the initial decisions we want people to make and plan for. Where you see very sudden closures and very sudden issues, that is because there has not been that local planning and partnership in place.

Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson: That was my mistake for confusing the two issues. Can I just go back to this question about PAN and the independent adjudicator? Say that an independent adjudicator is faced with a position where an academy supported by a trust is saying, "We're a really good school, we have great outcomes and we want to carry on growing", but the local area is seeing a reduction in numbers and there is a concern from the local authority that if this academy continues to grow it will suck pupils from other schools that are struggling. If that is a dispute that is not reconciled by the duty to co-operate, it goes to the independent adjudicator. Tell me if I am getting any of this wrong?

Georgia Gould: No, you are exactly right. This is exactly a decision that would be going to the independent adjudicator.

Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson: It goes to the independent adjudicator, and then what, if any, central guidance is there from the department

about how the individual adjudicator should make that decision? Or is this being left open to the adjudicator. Is it just, "Your judgment, go for it"?

Alex Marsh: It definitely will not be a rudderless set of decisions. We have already set out some core statutory principles around how this should work; for example, and actually to precisely the illustration that you give, the adjudicator should essentially only reduce the scale of a high performing school if it is really clear that not to do so would have a really detrimental effect on the children in other schools. There is a presumption that we should be enabling really high-performing schools to grow unless we can see that that is going to have a damaging impact on children in the round. That is at the level of a principle.

What you are pointing at, I think, is how we are going to put flesh on the bones of actual guidance of this. That then comes into how we implement this power that we took in the Act, part of which will be through us updating the admissions code. We are going to be putting more detail in the admissions code on how this would work, as well as some other measures such as the power to direct admissions and some other questions that go to the broader point you are making about outcomes: how do we strengthen fair access protocols and how do we give more information to parents about in-year admissions? All of these questions will be further elaborated in the update to the admissions code. We will be consulting on that later in the year.

Baroness Shawcross-Wolfson: When do you think that will be finalised, post consultation?

Alex Marsh: Hopefully from September 2027.

Georgia Gould: The duty to co-operate has been vested and that has just started.

Q44 **Baroness Watkins of Tavistock:** I would just like to come back to this admission code. Can you foresee that it might need something that will state that a child of four should not be expected to travel for more than an hour each way to school a day? There are some really straightforward things that will make a huge difference to children's learning, particularly children who have not been fed breakfast and then have to get in and probably then get to school late and do not get to the breakfast club. I realise that is unlikely in big cities, but it is not unlikely in some places. I was very pleased to hear you were going to Cornwall. I have worked in Cornwall and Devon for 35 years and I can think of places where that would really happen if we do not get this right.

Georgia Gould: That presumption to protect rural schools is in place to protect against exactly that. So where that school is the only school in an area, there are lots of circumstances where those schools are supported to keep going where, in another circumstance, they would not be able to continue. That is already in place in how we make decisions, but also in how we fund. The sparsity factor within funding is built in to support those rural schools, to enable them to be supported over and above.

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock: I firmly believe that you want the same as the rest of this committee. The problem is that some local authorities have told us that what does not come into the financial consideration pot is the cost of the travel. If you put all that in and uplift a pupil premium, you might keep a school open because it would be better. But these budgets for travel and budgets for the pupil premium are so separate, so I just wanted to say that.

Georgia Gould: We have also included sparsity within the MHCLG budget for home-to-school transport for exactly that reason: to support local authorities that are having to pay large amounts for travel, and reflecting that concern. In the latest funding for home-to-school transport it is now a separate funding stream with sparsity built into it: that is a new thing that has happened at the last local government funding settlement.

One of the biggest issues we are seeing in home-to-school transport is around funding for children with special educational needs and disabilities. That is where there has been the highest growth. The biggest issue is that children with those additional needs can find it really difficult to travel those large distances, and what it does to their regulation and mental health. I have talked to so many young people and heard the impact that that has had. There is an 18 year-old I spoke to who said that when he finally came back to his community to start his adulthood he did not have any friends or networks because he had been travelling over an hour to school. So the key principle that sits within our SEND reforms is around local provision.

The reason we are developing these specialist provision packages that effectively create nationally defined guidance on the kind of provision that we expect every local authority to have is to deal with this issue. We are supporting inclusion basically because that can allow specialist support to be much closer to communities. This is actually particularly important in rural communities, so, just to reassure you, that is a huge priority as part of the reforms. We expect that to create better outcomes for children, lessening the travel time they are having to take. It will also save money, but by doing the right thing for children.

Q45 **Baroness Hollins:** I just wanted to comment on what you said about being bussed to school as a disabled young person, as my son was many years ago. That was his biggest complaint: he had no friends locally, but he was lucky because he was welcomed in the Scouts. So he was included in Scouts but not at school, and that is where his friends were.

Community belonging is really important. You have spoken a lot about the opportunities of falling rolls and the SEND reform plans; I am particularly interested in the greater opportunities for SEND provision. We heard from head teachers that many of them are concerned that the reduction in per pupil funding due to falling rolls, coupled with the rising number of children with SEND and complex needs, is undermining their ability to realise the department's very good ambitions.

We heard about children with complex needs not having their needs met, then other children being taken away by parents, thus making a school less popular if they were good at inclusion. We heard about staff injuries. We are just worried and want to know whether you are confident that the sector has the wider support it needs to implement your department's ambitions. I think you said you are, but I wondered if you had anything more that you could add?

Georgia Gould: There has been a huge issue that schools have not had the support they need in order to be able to provide that inclusive education. When I speak to head teachers, teachers and support staff, they came into education to be able to support the children in their community. They want to lead inclusive schools and they want to teach in inclusive classrooms, but, as the committee has heard, they have not always felt that the resource, the training and the support were in place to enable that. We need to address all of those things and, indeed, the accountability.

First is that specialist expertise that I have talked about: the new experts-at-hand service. Many schools will say that they cannot find a speech and language therapist or an educational psychologist who will come into schools. Many children are getting assessments online, and this is not a workforce that is often getting to be directly in schools. When you speak to people in that workforce they say it can be really demoralising because they want to work with children. The entire purpose of the experts-at-hand service is to be a direct intervention in schools.

We think that the average primary school will get about 40 days of that expert support and the average secondary school will get about 160 days as we build up the offer. That is not there at the moment; it is going to start in September. We are doing a huge amount on training and building up the workforce over the next three years. As we transition into the new system we want to give more money directly to schools to be ring-fenced for special educational needs and disabilities; this is the new inclusion mainstream fund that has started to go into schools, of £500 million a year. As we move forward into post 2030 and into the reform, we want to have more of a high needs budget going directly into schools. The status quo is that if there is a need that a child has, schools will have to apply for an EHCP and a top-up for the local authority. That can often be a really adversarial and difficult process, sometimes waiting years while the child's needs are getting worse and the school is having to pick up the gap in that funding.

We want to turn it on its head so schools are getting upfront funding to be able to support the children that they have in their school and the specialist support that wraps around it. While we move to the new system we are double funding the current system and then putting additional support in; in the new system that will be a much greater stable support for schools.

Another issue that comes up all the time is training and support for staff. It is the top issue that teachers raise as somewhere they want to see

investment, so we are putting £200 million into continuous professional development for schools, teachers and leaders, as I have set out.

The final thing is space, and not just the inclusion base as we have talked about. We have also set out new inclusive by design guidance for schools, which is acoustics, lighting, accessible changing rooms—everything that makes a school a genuinely inclusive place for children with SEND. That is where we are putting £3.7 billion, so it is a really significant investment package into transforming outcomes for children with SEND, backed by new research and tools that we will be developing for national inclusion standards. We really want to see that transformative impact across these different areas.

We have just finished the consultation and we are still carefully reviewing it. We have had lots of input from teachers, support staff, parents and heads. We will be setting out those final proposals, but we are putting a significant amount of investment support into making this transformation. We are not expecting it to happen overnight; we are taking the time to get it right over the coming years. I have not really emphasised this, but it is also really important that we are investing more per pupil into the school system, so we are increasing funding for schools across the board as well as the specific funding for SEND.

Baroness Hollins: Minister, is that additional funding likely to mean smaller class sizes that children with special educational needs who are not in specialist inclusion units but in the classroom can join? Given the rising number of children with needs, that is a possibility. How much extra per pupil will there be, or is a smaller classroom that can be inclusive a possibility? That is one bit. Another is that head teachers I have spoken to have suggested that they need more teaching assistants and, as well as professional development, they need space for reflective practice.

Georgia Gould: With the inclusion bases we expect those to be smaller group settings, either classes within a specialist base or interventions. But we do not expect that the coming three years of the investment we have brought in will mean that classes generally will become smaller.

Over time, as more money goes through directly into schools, it gives them the opportunity to look at how they deploy their resources for children. We have talked about some of the nurture groups that schools have put in place to support the transition from primary to secondary. Sometimes that can be a smaller class. We expect schools to have more resource over time that they can put into staffing and ensuring schools are in the best possible place to support children with SEND.

That is not core to our reforms. As part of our reforms we want teachers to have the training and support to be able to deliver high-quality adaptive teaching to meet the needs in their classrooms, supported where they need to be by the experts we are bringing in and the support and support staff who are also trained to provide that extra support. Then

the support bases and inclusion bases are available to provide that smaller and more targeted support.

Baroness Hollins: But there will be only 40 days a year of expert help per school—is that what you said?

Georgia Gould: Yes. We expect that support to be used in a range of ways. We expect it to support the capacity of support staff and teachers to be able to provide those interventions for children. Those support staff might support with curriculum development, they might do sensory walks around the school or they might give advice on how particular children can be supported. It is very much a relationship with teachers and support staff to ensure that they have all the tools and strategies to be able to provide that help, as well as direct intervention with groups of children around sensory processing, speech and language, and other needs. That is from a place where that resource is just not available in schools, so we think this is a quite significant shift in terms of the expertise we will see within the school system and building up the capacity to be able to provide that support.

Q46 **Lord Faulkner of Worcester:** How difficult is it for parents of children with particular physical or mental needs to get into special schools? I should declare that I am a patron of New College Worcester, which is, as I am sure you know, one of the leading schools for blind and visually impaired students in the West Midlands.

The head tells me that they are increasingly having to wait to offer places for months and months and months while parents are sent, or choose to go, to tribunals because the local authority reaction when they are faced with a sort of bill that they know they are going to have to pay if they are going to get a child into a college such as that is going to be very significant—well into six figures—and a lot of them do not have a budget to do that. So they say, “Well, no, we cannot give you a place, but you go to a tribunal and see what they say”. That could take a year and is obviously an expense for the parents, but it is also an expense for the school because they have to go to the tribunal and argue their case as to why they are the best place for these children to come to. It does not look to me as if we are being very fair to them.

Georgia Gould: No, the system is not working at the moment, and we are really clear about it. It is not working for parents, young people, schools and the local authorities. Too many children are being failed and too many are waiting far too long to get the support they need. We are seeing two things. First, children are having to wait so long for that initial support that their needs are escalating and sometimes they could have really thrived at mainstream schools but actually they are having to go to special schools because that early support has not been put in place. As you say, there is a real postcode lottery around the country and in some areas children who really should be in specialist provision are not getting the access to specialist provision.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: I am not sure if it is a lottery; it sounds to

me as if it is a competition that nobody wins.

Georgia Gould: It is a system that has become very antagonistic because it is so often based on a tribunal. I have spoken to families who have spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on tribunals. For many families that is just not an available route, so there is an inequality baked into that.

As part of the reforms we want to make it much clearer what the access point to specialist provision should be. We want to support local authorities in their area to develop the specialist provision packages to ensure that the right range of needs can be met in that area. It will be a national system, and we will set national price bands on that to stop that inequality in different parts of the country. We will expect local authorities to plan against those provision packages so that there are places available for children when they need them.

There is much more clarity for parents and schools around what access there is to specialist provision and what should be supported within mainstream schools as part of the new layers of support. We are introducing targeted plus support, which is where the experts at hand will wrap around children, whether it be a more intense offer within the mainstream school or targeted; that might be a much smaller adaption, such as needing a movement break in your class, needing to go to lunch five minutes early or needing a reading intervention at that targeted level. We are trying to create a system where there is support at every level, where schools—in their universal offer—are genuinely inclusive, where the children who need to be in specialist provision are able to access that quickly, and where the places are available to them. That is the intention of the reforms.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: The places are there at the school now; it is just that they are not filling them because of this long gap between getting through the tribunal system and getting an award.

Georgia Gould: Part of the accountability we are putting in place for local authorities through this and the reform plans I mentioned earlier is around the speed of decision-making.

Q47 **Baroness Nichols of Selby:** You have mentioned this actually, and I am sure the lack of educational psychologists is on the radar, but there seems to be a massive shortage in my local authority area, North Yorkshire, covering Scarborough as well. They do not seem to be able to recruit, which is not helping the situation.

I just want to add, because obviously in the school it is a team, that I was quite horrified yesterday when a couple of the heads said they had no teaching assistants left. I just wonder how you are linking into the SSSNB and how that could maybe help with the training et cetera. Could you look at the overall package for teaching assistants? They are just as important as teachers in a school. I am sure the Minister would expect me to say that.

Georgia Gould: Very much so. We are putting £40 million into training up new educational psychologists and new speech and language therapists, as that is where we are seeing workforce shortages. This is on top of investment that has already gone in, so we are seeing more ed psychs coming through the system and we are investing in more. Through the experts-at-hand offer, as part of these new teams it can be existing ed psychs, but it can also be trainee assistant ed psychs who can also build up their expertise as part of those teams.

We also have a hope that more educational psychologists will come back from the private sector. We hear that many had left because the role had become very much focused on assessment and not actually proactively supporting teachers and children, so we think there is a real opportunity. But as part of the new experts-at-hand service we are working really closely with health colleagues to look at workforce projections to make sure that we are building up that workforce.

In terms of teaching assistants, I agree that all the evidence shows that really well-trained teaching assistants can play a critical role in supporting children and young people. I hear a lot from young people with SEND about how important that relationship is. There are real discrepancies around the country, so the thinking behind developing the SSSNB is around taking a national view of its role, its importance and the terms and conditions that it has, and that is something we are working very hard to develop quickly.

Q48 **The Chair:** I shall bring this session to a close, but a huge thank you, Minister, for the time you have spent with us this morning and the open way in which you have answered all our questions, as well as your officials, Anne and Alex. We will carefully look at the transcript, as I am sure you will, and we will add up all the numbers.

Georgia Gould: Yes. We will send you the detail of the PE premium breakdowns.

The Chair: Yes. Just on that point, this is a short inquiry so, if you could act fairly quickly on that, we would be very grateful.

Georgia Gould: We will. We really appreciate it. As you have hopefully heard, this is something we are actively looking at and will continue to do so, so we really welcome your recommendations.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. On that positive note, I will bring this session to a close.