

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [The Government's Catch-up programme](#), HC 940

Wednesday 12 January 2022

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Members present: Ian Mearns (in the Chair); Apsana Begum; Miriam Cates; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; Kate Osborne; Nicola Richards; Christian Wakeford.

In the absence of the Chair, Ian Mearns was called to the Chair.

Questions 48 - 84

Witness

I: Karen Guthrie, Programme Director - National Tutoring Programme, Randstad.

Written evidence from witnesses:



Examination of witness

Witness: Karen Guthrie.

Q48 Chair: Good morning and welcome to the Education Select Committee. I have been asked to chair the Committee this morning in the absence of our Chair, Rob Halfon, who is unwell. We send Rob our best wishes for a speedy recovery and I am afraid that in the interim you are stuck with me. This morning we welcome Karen Guthrie from the National Tutoring Programme, and members will be asking her questions about the delivery programme done via Randstad.

Good morning, Karen. Would you mind quickly introducing yourself and your role at Randstad, and giving us a little flavour of the work that you do, for the benefit of those watching on Parliament TV?

Karen Guthrie: Good morning. My name is Karen Guthrie. I am the programme director for the National Tutoring Programme. Thank you for the opportunity to come and speak about this hugely important programme.

For those who don't know who we are, we have been working in the education sector for the last 30 years. On average, we work with nearly 5,000 schools every day and place over 20,000 teachers in schools across the UK but, more importantly, as an organisation we have been providing managed services in the public and private sector for a long time now. We work with over 40 public and private organisations, working with 500 different types of suppliers.

From a more personal perspective, I have been very heavily involved with local authorities up and down the country, providing special educational services for looked-after and cared-for children. It is a very personal objective of the programme.

Q49 Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I will kick off. Can you give us the latest figures of how many pupils are accessing each strand of the National Tutoring Programme? How are you going to reach your target for the number of pupils participating in the National Tutoring Programme?

Karen Guthrie: In the data that were released yesterday by the Department for Education, 302,000 pupils have been reached through the programme so far—that is, 300,000 pupils have already accessed the programme—but we are under no illusion that there is still work to do. This is a very important and massive programme. As I said, we are encouraged that 300,000 pupils have accessed the programme. That is 52,000 in the TP pillar, which is tuition partners, 20,000 through the academic mentors pillar, and 230,000 through the school-led tuition. It is encouraging that the number of pupils who have accessed the programme so far is the same number who had access in the whole of last year. That is encouraging but there is still work to do in this space to reach as many pupils as we need to.



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Q50 **Chair:** You say it is encouraging, but it has been reported that this means the Government are 85% off meeting their ambitious target of 2 million courses of 15 hours' tutoring this academic year. You say it is encouraging, but you have done 15% and there is 85% to go. Why are you encouraged by those figures?

Karen Guthrie: The programme is ambitious and it is 100% correct that we have ambitious targets because making up for lost learning for pupils is hugely important. To go back to my earlier point, Chair, while it is encouraging that schools are making the decision to use the programme to support pupils, we know that the programme has very ambitious targets and we are working very hard to achieve that. We are also not doing it by ourselves. We have partnered with Liverpool Hope University and the Education Development Trust and we have doubled the number of suppliers on the framework that schools can access so that when they are ready to access the programme the capacity is there for them to do that.

Q51 **Chair:** It was reported, and the figures released yesterday show, that the pillars that Randstad is more directly involved in are just 9% towards the target of 776,000 pupils impacted, which is more than double last year's reach.

Karen Guthrie: Our main objective here is the overarching aim to reach the number of pupils that we need to work with. We are not promoting one strand over the other. We want to promote to schools that they have a choice and that when they are identifying the pupils in their schools who need support, they have the choice to be school-led, use academic mentors or use tuition partners. That is important to us so that we reach the number of pupils we need, overarching, on the programme.

Q52 **Chair:** Are you confident that in the time remaining in the academic year this will be scaled up so that every youngster who needs to access this tutoring will be able to do so?

Karen Guthrie: Yes, we are on track, but I am very mindful that we work in collaboration with our partners to achieve this target. As I mentioned, we have doubled the number of providers that are available to reach this target and we are doing work with the Education Development Trust and Liverpool Hope University. It is a collaborative approach to ensuring that we reach the numbers of people we need to.

Q53 **Chair:** You don't agree with a tuition partner who said that the statistics were scandalously poor?

Karen Guthrie: No, I don't agree with that. We remain really focused on achieving the overarching objective of this programme, which is making sure that we offer choice and flexibility to schools so that when schools make a decision and identify pupils in their school who need support, we have the capacity and the choice ready for them to see what suits them best.



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Q54 **Chair:** The main ask from our perspective, as the Select Committee overseeing the Department—you are saying that you are encouraged and that you believe that the ambitious targets can be achieved—is, will you commit to providing our Committee with regular updates on the numbers of pupils receiving tuition in the National Tutoring Programme, please?

Karen Guthrie: Of course. If it is helpful to the Committee, we are happy to share that as we move through the programme.

Q55 **Christian Wakeford:** On the particular point of the supplier describing it as woefully poor, the figures are way off. How are you going to catch up on the catch-up?

Karen Guthrie: There are a couple of things that we want to do here. As I mentioned, we are not doing this by ourselves. That is the primary focus here. We have doubled the number of suppliers that are available on the framework. There were 33 last year and there are nearly 60 on the framework at the moment. We will continue to do that as we move through the programme. We will continue to search out and invite tuition partners to be part of this programme so that, when schools decide it is right for them to work with a tuition partner, they are available. Not only that, we are working with schools and talking to schools every single day. We are taking feedback from schools so that we can improve the service and make it available to them when they make the decision that it is right for them.

Q56 **Dr Johnson:** I want to be clear on the reasons why the number of children receiving tuition is not as high as the number we would like, and the number that clearly you would like, too. Is it that the tutoring programme does not have the capacity for the children who are trying to access it or the schools that are trying to do it on their behalf, or is it that there is adequate supply, or excessive supply, of tutoring available for your programme but the schools are not coming forward to use it?

Karen Guthrie: There is capacity in the programme to support pupils who need it. We are seeing that schools are deciding to use the programme and we have had 300,000 access the programme already, but we still have work to do in this space. There are lots of schools that we need to work with, lots of pupils that we need to reach. The capacity is there and I am very aware that there is a lot going on in schools at the moment. They have a lot on their plates and they are dealing with staff absences and Covid. Our objective is to make sure that when a school is ready to access this programme, regardless of whether they use school-led tuition, an academic mentor or a tuition partner, the capacity is there and ready for them to access it. We want to work with schools and make it easy for them to use the programme.

Q57 **Dr Johnson:** What I think you are saying—please correct me if I am wrong—is that you have capacity but currently it is being underutilised because schools are not, in your phrase, ready to use it just yet. What do you think is holding them back?



Karen Guthrie: I think schools are using the programme at the moment.

Q58 **Dr Johnson:** Well, some clearly are not—much fewer, 85% below target. I am trying to identify why that gap is there. Is the gap there because the facilities are not available if they want them, or is it because the schools are not using what is available to them? You seem to be saying to the Committee today that the schools are not coming forward to use the tuition facility that has been provided, and I want to understand why.

Karen Guthrie: I believe they are using the facility.

Dr Johnson: Some are, but why are the 85% not?

Karen Guthrie: Some are using the facility. I go back to the bandwidth that schools have at the moment. We are very mindful that schools are under a lot of pressure. There is a lot going on in schools. We want to make the programme is available to them so that when they are ready and able to use the programme it is there and easy to access and they can put pupils on the programme as and when they want. It is important to us that we remain agile and flexible and can react quite quickly so that when a school wants to use the programme we make it available for them.

Q59 **Dr Johnson:** You rightly identify that schoolteachers are very busy at the moment. They are working very hard. There are people absent from schools because of Covid and isolation and suchlike, but that is one of the reasons that the programme is there. It is there to help. What is it about the process that schools have to go through for pupils to access it that means they need to be ready and have the bandwidth to do it? Why is it not made simpler for them to access so that they do not need extra bandwidth? They can use the tuition as the extra bandwidth it is designed to be.

Karen Guthrie: The programme is all about choice. It is important to us that we make the programme easy to use and that schools can decide which avenue of tuition they can use. We are encouraged, even though we know there is more work to do, that over 300,000 pupils have already been put on the programme. That is the same as the whole year last year. That being said, we know that there is more work to do here. We know we need to reach out to schools and, when they are ready, to have the capacity and the availability of programmes for them.

Q60 **Dr Johnson:** What about parents? Some parents may be very worried about their children's performance at school, worried that their children are falling behind because they have been off school with Covid or in isolation. Can they access your programme independently, or do they have to wait for the school to do it?

Karen Guthrie: That is a really good question. From a personal perspective, I have two very small primary-age children, so I have first-hand experience of the impact of the loss of learning and having to work from home and having two kids. I totally get it from a parents' and



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carers' perspective. We value parents and carers in this because they are the advocates for their children in school. Schools make the decision, because they are best placed to do so, about which pupils need support and which tuition path is best suited to the needs of those pupils, but we recognise how important parents and carers are in this. As part of our programme of continuous improvement, we have set up focus groups, and one of the stakeholder groups in that is parents and carers. It is important that we reflect their worries and concerns so that when schools are making decisions the communication flow is good.

Dr Johnson: The answer to that is no, it has to be the school.

Karen Guthrie: No, it has to be the school, but parents and carers are strong influences in this as well.

Q61 **Tom Hunt:** We have seen some data about the proportion of young people who are eligible for free school meals premium who are part of the tutoring programme. Do you have any data for the percentage with learning disabilities, special educational needs? Do you have any data on that?

Karen Guthrie: It is right that this programme is trying to reach disadvantaged learners and learners with additional needs. I don't have the data specifically to date on learners who have special educational needs. I am happy to share that after with the Committee if that would be helpful. We have seen that the number of pupils in receipt of pupil premium has increased compared to last year. That is increasing month on month all the time. Our colleagues in DfE will be sharing some details of that shortly. I am sure the Committee agree that the pandemic has not been selective in this space so it is important that we make this available to all types of pupils.

Q62 **Tom Hunt:** Quite. It is right that this programme focuses on disadvantage but, of course, disadvantage manifests itself in different ways. A lot of that is socioeconomic but some will be learning disability. We know that many young people with learning disabilities have been impacted in particular ways by remote learning and so on. Is there a large number who are engaging with the programme who have learning disabilities? Has that increased or has it gone down? What is your sense about how they have been impacted by the pandemic?

Karen Guthrie: I don't have that data to hand but I am happy to share that with the Committee afterwards if it would be helpful. I can share with the Committee that over half of the providers that we currently have on the framework have the capability to support students with special educational needs. We also have a cohort of providers on the framework who are specialists in this area. If we look at how the programme has been set up, there is additional funding available for special schools to put support in place for those learners. I don't have the specific numbers to hand but I can share them afterwards.



Tom Hunt: That is half the providers have the ability to support young people with special needs. I think you used another statistic after that.

Karen Guthrie: Yes. On the framework we have a number of providers who have experience of working and providing tuition and educational support for learners with special educational needs. We also have a cohort of providers on the framework who are experts in this space who have worked with special schools, alternative provisions, and have the real capability to support those young people.

Q63 **Tom Hunt:** You are confident that the expertise is there?

Karen Guthrie: The expertise exists in the framework, yes.

Chair: I am conscious that we are still on the first question, technically, but Christian has a follow-up.

Q64 **Christian Wakeford:** Consider it a free-for-all, Chair. You have mentioned that you do not have the figures to hand for the likes of SEND, pupil premium, free school meals. Do you know roughly how you are performing against the DfE's target of 65% of students on pupil premium taking up the programme?

Karen Guthrie: It is absolutely appropriate that we focus on pupil premium pupils first. I know this Committee is well aware that evidence suggests that they are the cohort of learners that has been most impacted by the pandemic. We are quality-assuring those figures at the moment and they will be shared by our DfE colleagues shortly, but we are seeing an increase from last year in the number of pupil premium pupils accessing the programme and that number is increasing month on month since September. We will be able to share those figures shortly with the Committee.

Q65 **Christian Wakeford:** I appreciate that it is improving but are we hitting the targets, yes or no?

Karen Guthrie: We are working towards the target, yes, and I will be in a position to share those details and those numbers with you. I am mindful that we quality assure the numbers and we publish the numbers that are appropriate and quality-assured for the Committee.

Q66 **Christian Wakeford:** That is a no. As you said, with pupil premiums being the most vulnerable, the most impacted by Covid and the most likely to have suffered from isolation and not had access to laptops, why aren't they above target? Why does it feel like they are an afterthought rather than the sole focus of what the NTP is trying to achieve?

Karen Guthrie: I agree with you that they are one of the key cohorts that has been most impacted by the pandemic, but I go back to my earlier point that the pandemic has not been selective in this space. We are talking to school leaders every single day of the week and they are telling us that they are 100% focused on their pupil premium pupils, but there are other learners who have also been impacted by the pandemic.



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We need to make sure that schools have a choice of the tuition that they select when they are servicing the needs of pupils.

Q67 **Kate Osborne:** Good morning, Karen. Before Randstad took over the contract, the National Audit Office found that the NTP may not reach the most disadvantaged children. You have just been asked about pupil premium. I was going to ask you what proportion of pupils accessing the National Tutoring Programme are eligible for free school meals. You have talked about the numbers increasing and you have used the word “shortly” for when you will have these figures. When is that? When is the “shortly” that you are talking about?

Karen Guthrie: The figures on the number of pupil premium pupils who are accessing the programme at the moment are being quality-assured by our colleagues in the Department and on the NTP programme as well. I expect them to be released in a number of weeks.

Q68 **Chair:** We have had a problem sometimes with the Department publishing figures, and they have been very hard to access. When they are released will you furnish us with them directly as well, please?

Karen Guthrie: Absolutely.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Q69 **Kate Osborne:** In a previous evidence session the Committee was told that some regions were much more familiar with tutoring than others and some areas were building on what was in place, whereas others were going from a standing start. How are you tackling regional disparities in accessing the NTP? Can you give us any regional breakdown of how schools are currently accessing it as well?

Karen Guthrie: We absolutely understand that there are regional disparities across England. These existed last year as well. It is important for the programme that we make this service available to all schools in England. When we started this programme we did some cold spot analysis and we did a mapping exercise across all the local authorities in England. It was very important to us when we completed our first round of procurement for tuition partners that where we identified cold spots in England we specifically went out to find tuition partners that could work in those areas. The north-east is a good example of that. That has been identified as a cold spot area, and in our most recent round of procurement for tuition partners we specifically went out to look for tuition partners who had capacity in that area. We have doubled the number of tuition partners that can service schools in the north-east.

Q70 **Chair:** Doubling from what level? It was a very low level to begin with, so doubling from nil doesn't give you much.

Karen Guthrie: We have nine providers now who have capacity to support schools in the north-east and other—

Q71 **Kate Osborne:** How does that compare to the south?



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Karen Guthrie: I don't have those numbers to hand at the moment, but we have doubled the number of providers on the entire framework. There were 33 last year and we have nearly 60 providers on the framework at the moment.

Q72 **Kate Osborne:** How many in the south, compared to the north, in that 60-odd?

Karen Guthrie: Again, I don't have those numbers off the top of my head. Approximately half of the providers have national coverage and then we have a cohort of providers that have regional capacity for both face to face and online.

Kate Osborne: Maybe you can provide those figures to the Committee.

Karen Guthrie: Of course.

Q73 **Miriam Cates:** There have been concerns over the selection of Randstad to administer the second year of the National Tutoring Programme. On 7 December we had Nick Bent, the chief executive of Tutor Trust, here in the Committee and he told us that, "Randstad simply does not have the capacity or the competence to deliver this programme effectively. It is now trying desperately to rectify that." He also raised concerns about the technology hub that is meant to organise the tutoring. You have covered some of this already, but what steps are you taking to address these publicly stated concerns about your ability to administer the programme, including the practical matters about the online booking hub?

Karen Guthrie: I am aware of the comments that Mr Bent raised. If I can focus on the platform first, the platform was implemented based on feedback from last year. Its primary focus is to act as a school interface system. Our No. 1 priority is schools and the pupils that schools support, and we wanted schools to be able to have a single entry point into the programme so that they don't need to go and search for tuition routes everywhere. They have one point to go to. They can access the framework of tuition providers, they can commission an academic mentor or they can access training for school-led tuition. That was important for us.

Our supply relationships are also important to us. I mentioned earlier that we manage over 40 managed service provisions in the UK for public and private sector companies. That is over 500 very complex supplier relationships. We have doubled the number of providers on this framework, but one unhappy supplier is one unhappy supplier too many from our perspective. To address that we have constant communication with our suppliers. We talk to our tuition partners daily, weekly and monthly. We have one-to-one sessions and group sessions. In partnership with our colleagues in DfE we are bringing all the tuition partners together, and we have a session this Thursday and another



session in a couple of weeks. The success of this programme is absolutely based on collaboration.

Q74 **Miriam Cates:** Can you give any practical examples of changes that you have made to the hub or to the booking system that have resulted in improvements?

Karen Guthrie: As part of our commitment to the programme, we have a continuous improvement programme. As I mentioned earlier, we set up three different focus groups and they included headteachers, tutors, parents and carers, our educational partners and tuition partners. In terms of some of the feedback that came out of those, we know time is precious for head teachers, and they wanted to have additional support from tuition partners to do the heavy lifting with the administration. We have made some improvements to the platform where tuition partners can do some of the administration on behalf of schools. We understand that time is precious in schools, so the more that we can do for them that lets them get on with their day job, the easier it is for them.

Q75 **Miriam Cates:** Are you in regular conversations with the DfE about these improvements and further improvements that need to be made?

Karen Guthrie: Yes, absolutely. We work with the DfE daily. As part of our programme of continuous improvement, if we identify a change that we need to make, through feedback to our focus groups, we will have discussion with the DfE about what the change is, what the impact is and whether it will drive positive outcomes for pupils and schools. Then we make the decision in collaboration to move forward with that.

Q76 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Karen. You mentioned earlier that Randstad has worked for 30 years with schools. Is it true to say that that has been mainly in recruitment and not in tuition? Do you think that that is one of the reasons for the poor take-up of 90% below the recruitment target?

Karen Guthrie: You are right that we have been working in the education sector for the last 30 years and we are experts in recruiting educators. However, we have been working in the sector of providing educational support to disadvantaged learners for a long time now. We are one of the market leaders in providing specialist support for learners with special educational needs and access for primary, secondary, further education and higher education. From a very personal perspective, I have been involved very heavily with local authorities where we are working with virtual schools to put educational support in place for looked-after and cared-for children. Some of these learners have not been in education in a very long time, so adapting a programme of education that re-engages those learners into education has been part of our experience.

If we look at where we are now, we have so many children who have lost the opportunity for learning during the pandemic. Tuition is key but so is



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engagement and making sure that we engage those children in the concept of education again so that we can achieve what we need to do.

Q77 **Kim Johnson:** I think that is an interesting point. How are you mapping how well those children have benefited from the tutoring programme? Last year the National Tutoring Programme was criticised for employing Sri Lankan tutors at £1.75 an hour. I would not consider that as good education. How are you monitoring the progress that is being made?

Karen Guthrie: That is a good question about outcomes. It is quite a personal objective for me. I am sure the Committee agrees that a positive outcome for one child on this programme can be very different to a positive outcome for another child. NFER has been engaged to do an overarching review of the impact of the programme. That is a long-term view of the impact. For us it was important that we did impact and feedback in real time, which is why we have set up those focus groups to understand what impact the programme is having and how we can work with schools to make sure that the tuition they are accessing drives a positive impact for pupils and schools.

Q78 **Kim Johnson:** When do you think we might get to see some of that data? We know that the most disadvantaged children have had a wider educational learning loss over the period of this Covid pandemic.

Karen Guthrie: Yes, absolutely. The first report from NFER is due in July and we expect to see some data from that then. From our own perspective, our focus groups are held every six weeks and we are in constant communication with schools, so we are taking that feedback in real time. Schools will be best placed to see the impacts that the National Tutoring Programme has had. We will see that in exam results. We are expecting to see the NFER report in July.

Q79 **Kim Johnson:** You were asked before about the regional breakdown. It would be very useful for this Committee to have access to some of that information going forward.

Karen Guthrie: Yes, I am happy to share that with the Committee afterwards.

Q80 **Chair:** We do not want the NFER research to be a tome that lies on a shelf. We want it to be a guide to future practice, surely. If it is not due until July, how quickly will you, as an organisation, be able to learn from that research and put into practice the recommendations it is making?

Karen Guthrie: There are two things that we can do with that. You are right that it is a long-term view on the impact of the programme. It is important to us that we get real-time feedback, so we are working with schools through our focus groups to say, "Is this having a positive impact? Talk to us about that. What can we change in real time in collaboration with our colleagues in the Department to make sure that the service is having the impact that the schools need it to have?"



Q81 **Chair:** It is good that the National Foundation for Educational Research is doing that work, but we do not want that to be an academic exercise—a pure research programme. Surely it has to be a guide to how we improve things in the future.

Karen Guthrie: Yes, absolutely. I agree with that. It is almost a balance of two things. We need that long-term view but we need real-time feedback as well so that we can make positive changes where needed on the programme to impact pupils in the right way.

Q82 **Christian Wakeford:** Karen, you mentioned that you have spent 30 years within the education sector and that you are experts in recruiting educators. If that is the case, why is there such a problem in the north?

Karen Guthrie: The regional disparities across the UK were there before we came into the programme. We recognise them and, as I said earlier, to combat that we have reopened our open access programme to proactively go out and find tuition partners that can provide tuition in the cold spot areas across the UK. We also proactively went out and are reaching out to schools in the area, reaching out to MAT leaders, working with our colleagues in the DfE, to make sure that we are using all the channels that we possibly can to do that.

To give you an example of that, in the eight days in the run-up to Christmas we spoke to over 2,500 schools and onboarded them into the programme. We have spoken to over half the schools in the north-east already. While I am pleased that we are talking to schools, there is more work to do in that space. There are more schools to speak to, more pupils we need to reach, and we will continue to do that.

Q83 **Christian Wakeford:** You have mentioned cold map areas quite a few times. Do any of those cold map areas coincide with opportunity areas, bearing in mind that opportunity areas were created for their convening power? If you are having difficulty with opportunity areas, does that not underlie the greater difficulties you are having across the piece?

Karen Guthrie: Our focus is on ensuring that we have capacity in the programme whether or not it is in a cold spot. We are looking to expand the capacity of the programme, and from our perspective it does not really matter if it is a large area, if it is an opportunity area. We will need to make the programme available to schools regardless of where they are in England.

Q84 **Chair:** Karen, obviously you have confidence in the model that you are providing, but at the moment it seems that the majority of schools are not accessing the tutoring programme via the model that you are providing. How are you going to engender confidence in the sector to get a much greater take-up from schools across the board?

Karen Guthrie: Schools are accessing the programme and we have seen 300,000 pupils access it. However, it is important that we are communicating with schools regularly, and part of our ongoing activity is



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hosting webinars, early-morning and twilight drop-in sessions for schools. We are hosting digital how-to sessions for schools at one-to-one group meetings and this is in partnership with our colleagues in DfE. We are raising awareness about the programme for schools so that when a school is ready to use the programme, the capacity is there and they have access to it when they need it.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming in. It is quite clear that the views about the way in which this is being delivered vary across the piece, but obviously, at the last analysis, it is about raising standards for children and helping them catch up with their lost learning. From that perspective, I wish you every success.

Karen Guthrie: Thank you, and thank you for the time today, Committee.