Department for Education

Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
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The Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chair, Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

1st March 2021

Dear Chair,

During the hearing on 23rd February on *Funding and Financial Management of Schools*, we committed to write to you on various matters during the session.

Ipsos MORI and Renaissance Learning Research Studies

As discussed during the hearing, the Department has contracted Ipsos MORI and Renaissance Learning to conduct separate research projects as part of our efforts to collect evidence on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the education of children and young people.

Renaissance Learning

The Department has commissioned Renaissance Learning, and their subcontractor, the Education Policy Institute, to provide a baseline assessment of catch-up needs for pupils in schools in England and monitor progress over the course of the year.

On 24 February we published the interim findings which show that in reading, pupils in Years 3-9 were on average 1.6-2 months behind where we would expect them to be in Autumn 2020 in a 'normal' year. In maths, pupils in Year 3-7 were on average around 3.2 months behind in Autumn 2020. The interim report is available here: [Pupils' progress in the 2020 to 2021 academic year: interim report - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk).

The study and spend was approved by ministers in July 2020 and held a total maximum budget of £450,000. The procurement of this research followed the standard Departmental commercial commissioning process. This involves a rigorous two-stage selection process undertaken by analysts, senior researchers, psychometricians, commercial and policy colleagues against criteria including organisational capacity, the suitability of the research proposal, and value for money. Renaissance Learning and their subcontractor the Education Policy Institute excelled in all assessment criteria at the judgement of the panel. Ministers did not sit on the panel to select the organisation; the composition of the panel is detailed in the commissioning documentation. The contract was awarded for £143,201, considerably less than the advertised budget, representing strong value for money for a year-long research project. This amount includes processing of pupil assessment results by Renaissance Learning and data analysis conducted by the Education Policy Institute.

Details of the contract can be found here: Research to Understand Progress During the 2020/21 Academic Year - Contracts Finder.

This research uses results assessments that schools are already using during this academic year as part of their usual formative assessment arrangements. This adds no additional burden on schools or teachers, and pupils will not have to sit any additional assessments for this research. Renaissance Learning is a leading provider of pupil-level, computer-adaptive reading and maths assessments. Almost 7,000 schools nationwide use data-driven Renaissance solutions to analyse students' abilities, allowing the research to draw on results from around 1 million pupils sitting assessments annually. Psychometricians in the Department verified the quality of these assessments before the contract was awarded. The Education Policy Institute are subcontracted by Renaissance Learning to conduct analysis of the reading and maths assessments results to estimate the extent of learning loss due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The advantage of using assessments such as those offered by Renaissance Learning is that they are standardised tests, which have not been changed as a result of the disruption to education due the Covid-19 pandemic. This allows comparison of assessment results in this academic year against results from assessments taken by pupils prior to the pandemic, to generate estimates of lost learning and catch-up needs. Schools also use these assessments at multiple points throughout the academic year which allows us to monitor the progress of pupils throughout the year.

Future reports will break down lost learning by pupil characteristics to identify groups of pupils whose academic progress have been particularly affected. The research will also track the impact of the latest period of restrictions on in person attendance at schools, and the extent to which pupils are able to catch-up over the course of the academic year.

Ipsos MORI and consortium

The Department for Education is committed to understanding both the economic and the social value of its programmes, alongside addressing questions of effectiveness and benefits to all, particularly the most vulnerable in our society. It was therefore important for the Department to seek to understand, from schools, how they are approaching recovery from any lost learning that has occurred as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ipsos MORI, in consortium with Sheffield Hallam University and the Centre for Education and Youth, were selected via an open and competitive bidding process to undertake this research.

The research utilises a mixed-methods study design (including surveys, interviews, and case studies) to robustly examine how schools are tackling the issue of lost learning. Results from the study will be used to understand how best to support schools in their endeavours to tackle learning loss, as well as understand how the catch-up premium funds have been spent.

The study and spend was approved by ministers in October of 2020, and the contract was awarded for £190,000. The procurement of this research followed the standard departmental commercial commissioning process. This involves a rigorous two-stage selection process undertaken by senior social researchers and policy colleagues, against criteria including methodological and professional expertise, organisational capacity, and demonstration of value for money. The selected consortium excelled in all assessment criteria at the judgement of the panel. Ministers did not sit on the panel to select the organisation; the composition of the panel is detailed in the commissioning documentation. Details of the contract can be found here: Research to understand schools' recovery approaches from lost time in education as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic - Contracts Finder

The organisation, as demonstrated within their bid, specialises in conducting a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, and demonstrated ample experience of effective use of these methods within schools.

Catch-up Premium

Fleur Anderson asked whether nurseries can access the catch-up premium. To clarify, the Catch up Premium is a one-off universal £650 million catch up premium for the 2020 to 2021 academic year to ensure that schools have the support they need to help all pupils make up for lost teaching time. School allocations are calculated on per pupil basis. Mainstream schools will get £80 for each pupil in from reception to year 11 inclusive. Special, Alternative Provision and hospital schools will get £240 for each place for the 2020 to 2021 academic year.

National Tutoring Programme Provision

The Committee requested some additional information about how the Tuition Partners are spread across England to ensure good provision in all areas. Our delivery partner, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), has approved 33 Tuition Partners who will offer high-quality, subsidised tuition to schools. These organisations were recruited via an open competition to meet the necessary quality standards.

The Tuition Partners offer a variety of tuition models for schools to choose from, including online, face-to-face, small-group and one-to-one tuition. There is a good blend of national and regional providers that can offer support to schools across all regions in England and 16 of the Tuition Partners are national providers. The programme ensures that additional support has been allocated to regions with the largest numbers of disadvantaged pupils and in regions where access to tutoring has historically been lower. Regional support was determined by taking as a baseline the spread of pupils eligible for pupil premium across the regions and then adjusting to recognise the disparities in current levels of provision. EEF have provided a guide to the Tuition Partners, which is available here: Guide to approved Tuition Partners: 2020–21 | NTP (nationaltutoring.org.uk). This sets out further detail about the Tuition Partners, including the regions they cover and how many schools they plan to work as well as other information about their offer – for example, subjects they cover and costs.

High needs funding increases

The Committee also asked about the use of funding for high needs within the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). As discussed during the evidence session, the high needs block of the DSG has increased by £780m in 2020-21 and will increase by a further £730m in 2021-22, an increase of 24% over two years. Each local authority has received at least an 8% increase in relation to 2-18 population in each of 2020-21 and 2021-22, and year-on-year increases have ranged up to 17% in 2020-21 and 12% in 2021-22.

The Department for Education clarified the School Finance regulations in 2020 so that local authorities can carry DSG deficits forward from year to year, to be met from future DSG income. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government also made new regulations in 2020 so that for the three years 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23 DSG deficits will be ring-fenced and will not affect the calculation of the overall balance on local authorities' general funds. This means that authorities do not need to budget to have general fund reserves or to reduce spending on other services to cover DSG deficits.

The DfE does expect all local authorities with a DSG deficit to have a plan for managing that deficit and to discuss the plan with their schools forum. The revised regulations allow local authorities to carry deficits forward from year to year, so that they can undertake expenditure to fulfil their statutory duties on SEND under the Children and Families Act 2014. But it is very important that local authorities take steps to manage their spending and to get the best value from what they spend. In light of the increased in funding for high needs set out above, most local authorities should be able to both (firstly) meet rising pupil need and (secondly) plan to get back into balance on their DSG account over the next few years. If necessary, authorities can also transfer up to 0.5% of their schools block to high needs with the agreement of their schools forum. As I mentioned during the hearing, a transfer of 0.5% of the schools block will typically equate to an increase of some 2.5 – 3% in an authority's high needs block. Where they wish to transfer more, or the schools forum disagrees, then they can ask the DfE to consider their case. We take into account a number of criteria, including whether the authority has a good plan for using the transfer to address cost pressures in a sustainable way.

We understand that some individual authorities have incurred such high deficits that they will not be able to eliminate them out of their DSG formula income over the next few years. As mentioned in the hearing, we have begun a programme of discussions with such authorities under which they will be able to receive additional DSG towards eliminating their accumulated deficit in return for clear conditions around the way in which they manage their high needs budget and make the best use of their resources.

The DfE did not undertake its usual collection of local authorities' education budget data for 2020-21 because of COVID-19, so we do not have a record of their planned expenditure on high needs this financial year. We will be collecting education outturn data for the current financial year as usual but that will not be available until late Autumn 2021.

Pupil premium funding and the October Census

The committee requested further information on the switch to using the October census for the pupil premium. As a similar commitment to write was made during his hearing with you on 9th February, Minister Gibb intends to write to the Committee on this point shortly.

Site acquisition costs

Finally, as more time is needed to gather the data, Tony will write to the Committee separately on the question from David Simmonds at the end of the session regarding site acquisition costs.

We hope this letter is helpful and clarifies any outstanding issues.

Graham Archer

Director for Qualifications,
Curriculum and Extra-Curricular

Tony Foot

Director of Strategic Finance