



Education Committee

From the Chair
Helen Hayes MP

Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP

Secretary of State for Education
(*Sent via email*)

8 September 2026

Dear Lucy,

Review of the secondary English curriculum

Congratulations once again on your appointment as Secretary of State. My Committee and I are very much looking forward to working with you.

I am writing to follow up on an issue of some urgency raised in our inquiry into Reading for Pleasure. As part of the inquiry, we heard evidence on the role of the secondary English curriculum, in particular GCSE English Literature, in encouraging children to read for pleasure, and the impact of the changes recommended by the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

The evidence we received was deeply concerning. We heard that the secondary English curriculum is “dispiritingly dull” and that pupils’ experience is often limited to reading “short, exam length texts which do little to foster a love of reading.” Professor Robert Eaglestone, Policy Lead at the English Association, said that English is being taught “with a pedagogy that is inimical to reading for pleasure” and argued that student choice, personal response and dialogue had “taken a back seat to things like context and knowing the right answers.”¹

This issue is clearly evidenced by the steep decline in students choosing to study English Literature at A Level and beyond. Over the past 15 years, English Literature has fallen from being the most popular subject studied at A Level to 11th place in 2026.² Between 2015/16 and 2024/25, the number of pupils studying A Level English Literature fell by over 9,000 – a 21% decrease.³ The numbers of students going on to study English and associated subjects at university have also been decreasing steadily, with the numbers

¹ Education Committee, [Reading for Pleasure](#), July 2026

² Department for Education, [Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2026 exam series](#)

³ [Time-series - A level subject entries and grade by sex](#)

of students studying English and associated subjects falling by 10,900 between 2019/20 and 2024/25 – a 24% decrease.⁴

Our report recommended that the Department ensure that its work on developing the new English curriculum is considered through the lens of reading for pleasure and encouraging further study and that it take steps to revise the GCSE English Literature curriculum to improve the diversity and range of texts that pupils study. We understand that this work will be concluding shortly and that the new curriculum is to be published in spring 2027. The Department's work to develop the new curriculum represents a vital opportunity to get this right and revitalise the study of English for the next generations of students.

We urge you to look again at this issue and ensure that this opportunity is not wasted.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Hayes MP
Chair, Education Committee

⁴ Higher Education Statistics Agency, [What do HE students study?](#)