



House of Commons  
Committee of Public Accounts

---

**COVID-19: Support for  
children's education**

---

**Third Report of Session 2021–22**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 20 May 2021*

## The Committee of Public Accounts

The Committee of Public Accounts is appointed by the House of Commons to examine “the accounts showing the appropriation of the sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure, and of such other accounts laid before Parliament as the committee may think fit” (Standing Order No. 148).

### Current membership

[Meg Hillier MP](#) (*Labour (Co-op), Hackney South and Shoreditch*) (Chair)

[Mr Gareth Bacon MP](#) (*Conservative, Orpington*)

[Kemi Badenoch MP](#) (*Conservative, Saffron Walden*)

[Shaun Bailey MP](#) (*Conservative, West Bromwich West*)

[Olivia Blake MP](#) (*Labour, Sheffield, Hallam*)

[Dan Carden MP](#) (*Labour, Liverpool, Walton*)

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP](#) (*Conservative, The Cotswolds*)

[Barry Gardiner MP](#) (*Labour, Brent North*)

[Peter Grant MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, Glenrothes*)

[Mr Richard Holden MP](#) (*Conservative, North West Durham*)

[Sir Bernard Jenkin MP](#) (*Conservative, Harwich and North Essex*)

[Craig Mackinlay MP](#) (*Conservative, Thanet*)

[Sarah Olney MP](#) (*Liberal Democrat, Richmond Park*)

[Nick Smith MP](#) (*Labour, Blaenau Gwent*)

[James Wild MP](#) (*Conservative, North West Norfolk*)

### Powers

Powers of the Committee of Public Accounts are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 148. These are available on the Internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publication

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2021. This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament Licence, which is published at <https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright-parliament/>.

Committee reports are published on the [Committee’s website](#) and in print by Order of the House.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Media Officer), Ameet Chudasama (Committee Operations Manager), Richard Cooke (Clerk), Rose Leach (Committee Operations Officer), Ben Rayner (Second Clerk), Ben Shave (Chair Liaison).

### Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Committee of Public Accounts, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 5776; the Committee’s email address is [pubacom@parliament.uk](mailto:pubacom@parliament.uk).

You can follow the Committee on Twitter using [@CommonsPAC](#).

# Contents

---

<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1 The Department for Education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic</b>	<b>8</b>
Learning lessons	8
Attendance of vulnerable children	9
Supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities	10
Provision of IT equipment	12
<b>2 Catch-up learning</b>	<b>14</b>
Learning loss	14
Catch-up learning programme	14
National Tutoring Programme	15
<b>Formal minutes</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Witnesses</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Published written evidence</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament</b>	<b>21</b>



## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to our school system. Despite being involved in a 2016 cross-government exercise on dealing with an influenza pandemic, the Department for Education (the Department) had no plan for handling disruption of this kind and was unprepared for dealing with the challenges the pandemic presented in early 2020. Consequently, it struggled to react to events in a timely and effective way. The Department set no standards for in-school or remote learning during the rest of the 2019/20 school year and, as a result, children had very unequal experiences. The Department has still not properly assessed its early response in order to learn lessons for the future.

The disruption to schooling had particularly damaging effects on children who were already facing adversity. Although they could continue attending, most vulnerable pupils stopped going to school, and referrals to children's social care services fell, raising concerns about whether children were being effectively protected. Children with special educational needs and disabilities found remote learning especially difficult, and some lost access to specialist support and equipment, increasing risks to their health and welfare. Disadvantaged children also faced major barriers to effective home learning, which will have exacerbated the gap in attainment between them and their peers.

The Department has much work to do to help children recover from the effects of the disruption caused by the pandemic. Its catch-up programme is intended to help make up for the learning that children have lost since March 2020, but there is already evidence that the targeted elements of the programme may not be reaching the most disadvantaged children. More generally, the Department has worthy aspirations but little specific detail about how it will build the school system back better, including how it will secure best value from the £400 million it has spent on IT equipment to support children's online learning and the £1.7 billion it has committed to the catch-up programme.

## Introduction

---

In March 2020, there were almost 21,600 state schools in England, educating 8.2 million pupils aged four to 19. The Department is responsible for the school system, and is ultimately accountable for securing value for money from the funding provided for schools.

On 18 March 2020, the government announced that, to help limit transmission of the COVID-19 virus, from 23 March schools would close to all pupils except vulnerable children and children of critical workers. Education for most children would therefore take place remotely at home. While schools partially re-opened in June, most children did not return to school until the start of the new school year in September.

## Conclusions and recommendations

1. **The Department seems surprisingly resistant to the idea of conducting a proper lessons-learned exercise on its early response to the pandemic.** More than a year on from the start of pandemic, the Department has not yet carried out a full review of its response during the early stages to identify lessons to improve its emergency preparedness and response to any future disruptions. The Department says that it has learnt lessons organically as the pandemic has progressed, and that its handling of the second major closure of schools in the early months of 2021 was better than its approach in spring 2020. It also says that it wants to wait and consider lessons jointly with other government departments, rather than look unilaterally at its own response to the pandemic. In our view, by taking this approach, the Department risks learning lessons too late to improve how it supports the education system in the event of further disruption.

**Recommendation:** *The Department should carry out a systematic lessons-learned exercise, to evaluate its response to the pandemic and identify departmental-specific lessons. It should then write to us, setting out its main findings.*

2. **Only a small minority of vulnerable children attended school in the early stages of the pandemic, increasing the risk of hidden harm.** The Department acknowledges that the pandemic presented real safeguarding challenges. It kept schools open for vulnerable children—for example, those with a social worker or an education, health and care (EHC) plan, or those deemed ‘otherwise vulnerable’—because continued attendance was seen as an important way of safeguarding and supporting them. However, the proportion of vulnerable children who attended school or college remained below 11% from 23 March to late May 2020, and only reached a weekly average of 26% by the end of the summer term. The written evidence we received highlighted concerns about the potential impact of so few vulnerable children attending school. Referrals to children’s social care services for the weeks surveyed between 27 April and 16 August 2020 were around 15% lower than the average for the same period over the previous three years. The Department says that referral levels are still down by around 10% year-on-year, and that there are concerns about ongoing hidden harm to children.

**Recommendation:** *The Department should work with the Association of Directors of Children’s Services to understand why the number of referrals to children’s social care services remains below expected levels, and take action in light of the findings to make sure children are being effectively safeguarded.*

3. **The disruption to schooling had a particularly detrimental impact on children with special educational needs and disabilities, in terms of both their education and their health.** In spring 2020, the Department temporarily changed aspects of the law on EHC needs assessments and plans. While this reduced pressure on schools and local authorities, it meant that some children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) experienced delays in assessments and did not receive the support they would expect in normal times. While children with an EHC plan were eligible to continue attending school throughout the pandemic, in some cases risk assessments to determine whether children should be in school or at home were carried out without consulting families. The Department accepts that not all

schools were confident about educating children with an EHC plan during school closures, and there was local variation in the extent to which schools offered these children a place. Remote learning is especially difficult for children with SEND, and children with complex needs struggled because they did not have at home the specialist support and equipment they would normally have at school. In some cases, restrictions to their normal routine also affected children's health. The Department concedes that improvements will be needed in the event of future disruption, including better joint working with the Department of Health and Social Care.

**Recommendation:** *The Department should work with the Department of Health and Social Care to identify the specific actions needed to help children with SEND recover from the damage caused during the pandemic.*

4. **The Department has no vision for building on the investment it has made in IT equipment for vulnerable and disadvantaged children.** In the early stages of the pandemic, the Department initially considered trying to provide 602,000 laptops and tablets, and 100,000 4G routers, to priority groups of children. It scaled back these plans, however, and by the end of the summer term 2020 had delivered almost 215,000 laptops or tablets and 50,000 routers for children with a social worker and care leavers, and for disadvantaged children in year 10. The Department continued to distribute IT equipment during the 2020/21 school year, and by March 2021 had provided almost 1.3 million laptops and tablets. The Department intends to strike a balance between centralised procurement and allowing schools the autonomy to make their own choices about IT provision. It aims to support the sector with information and guidance, including through its education technology programme. Schools and local authorities own the IT equipment that the Department distributed during the pandemic. The Department says that it is the responsibility of these bodies to manage the risk of obsolescence and that schools should use their core funding to maintain the provision of suitable equipment.

**Recommendation:** *Access to IT equipment is vital for pupils, both in normal times and in times of disrupted schooling. The Department should set out a plan for how it will ensure that all vulnerable and disadvantaged children have access to IT equipment to support their learning at home. The plan should make clear the roles of the Department, local authorities and schools, and set out what funding will be available to maintain and replace equipment.*

5. **The Department has not set out how it will judge the effectiveness of the catch-up programme in making up for the learning children lost as a result of the disruption to schooling.** The disruption has adversely affected children's learning and development, with the learning loss greatest among disadvantaged children. The attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers is likely to grow significantly as a result of school closures. The Department has committed £1.7 billion to fund catch-up learning, and has commissioned independent evaluations of the National Tutoring Programme schemes, alongside research into how schools are using the £650 million universal catch-up premium in the 2020/21 school year. It says that the National Tutoring Programme schemes, which are intended to focus on disadvantaged children, will be judged on levels of take-up and evidence



that children are making significant progress, but it has not articulated what levels of take-up or pupil progression it wants these schemes to achieve, or how it will determine whether the catch-up programme as a whole has been effective.

**Recommendation:** *Alongside its Treasury Minute response, the Department should write to us, setting out clear metrics that it will use to monitor the catch-up learning programme, and what level of performance would represent success.*

6. **The success of the National Tutoring Programme will depend on the quality of provision and whether it reaches the disadvantaged children who need it most.** Previous evaluations by the Education Endowment Foundation indicate that tutoring programmes are effective in supporting children's learning. However, the Department recognises that the tutoring market is under-developed, and there have been issues with quality and access in the past. As well as supporting disadvantaged children to catch up on lost learning, the Department intends that the National Tutoring Programme schemes will improve quality and grow capacity in the tutoring market. It expects that the 'tuition partners' scheme will reach between 200,000 and 250,000 children in 2020/21, and that tutoring will become an integral part of the education system. However, at February 2021, only 44% of children receiving tuition were eligible for pupil premium funding, raising questions over whether the scheme will reach the children who need it most. Also at February 2021, demand for the 'academic mentors' scheme had outstripped supply, with more than 600 schools who had requested a mentor not having access to one.

**Recommendation:** *The Department should set out how it intends to gain assurance on the quantity and quality of tutoring and mentoring provided under the National Tutoring Programme. Its response should cover in particular how it intends to ensure there is adequate tutoring and mentoring provision in areas of the country where educational attainment is lower.*

# 1 The Department for Education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

---

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Department for Education (the Department) on its response to the COVID-19 pandemic in spring and summer 2020, and on how it is supporting children to catch up on the learning lost while normal schooling was disrupted.<sup>1</sup>
2. In March 2020, there were almost 21,600 state schools in England, educating 8.2 million pupils aged four to 19. The Department is responsible for the school system, and is ultimately accountable for securing value for money from the funding it provides to schools. For 2020–21, the Department's budget to support schools' core activities totalled £47.6 billion.<sup>2</sup>
3. On 18 March 2020, the Government announced that, to help limit transmission of COVID-19, from 23 March schools would close to all pupils except vulnerable children and children of critical workers. Education for most children would therefore take place at home. Schools partially re-opened on 1 June, to children in reception classes and years 1 and 6. In mid-June, schools began providing face-to-face support to students in years 10 and 12 to support their remote learning. But most children did not return to school until the new school year began in September.<sup>3</sup>

## Learning lessons

4. The Department confirmed that, in 2016, it had taken part in Exercise Cygnus, a cross-government exercise that tested how the UK would respond to a pandemic flu outbreak. In subsequent written evidence, the Department told us that an outcome of Exercise Cygnus had been a focus on how to keep schools open, even in the event of high staff sickness levels, and that the exercise had not focused on school closures as a means of reducing transmission.<sup>4</sup>
5. The Department said that schools worked with local resilience forums and had developed their own closure plans, focusing on local issues such as severe weather conditions.<sup>5</sup> At the start of 2020, however, the Department did not have a plan for managing mass disruption to schooling on the scale caused by COVID-19. In the absence of such a plan, its response to the pandemic was largely reactive, responding to events as they unfolded. The Department has not yet conducted a systematic exercise to evaluate its response during the early stages of the pandemic and identify lessons for potential future disruption to schooling.<sup>6</sup>
6. The Department accepted that, looking back and knowing what it knew now, there were issues it might have handled differently, but told us that it had tried to learn as much

---

1 C&AG's Report, *Support for children's education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*, Session 2019–21, HC 1239, 17 March 2021

2 C&AG's Report, paras 1, 2

3 C&AG's Report, paras 3, 5

4 Q 16; Letter to Committee from DfE dated 22 April 2021

5 Q 18

6 C&AG's report, paras 1.4, 1.8, 1.9

as possible throughout the pandemic in order to make changes as it went along.<sup>7</sup> It said, that at each stage, it had sought to draw on lessons from the previous stage and to take account of feedback from schools to inform what it did next.<sup>8</sup> For example, it explained that it had got better at communicating messages to schools – it had issued guidance for the September re-opening in July, giving schools notice not just for the whole of the summer holiday, but for a period at the end of the summer term. It acknowledged, however, that there were times, such as in January 2021, when the situation changed so rapidly that it had been very difficult for it to give schools the notice it would have liked.<sup>9</sup>

7. We asked the Department when it expected to conduct a lessons-learned exercise. It highlighted that the pandemic had often required it to take action collectively with other organisations as it could not respond unilaterally to what was a health situation. It said that any such exercise should therefore be carried out collaboratively with the rest of government in order to draw out consistent lessons.<sup>10</sup>

### Attendance of vulnerable children

8. The Department recognised that continued school attendance was an important way of safeguarding and supporting vulnerable children while schools were closed to most pupils. However, the proportion of children defined as in need under the Children Act 1989, or with an education, health and care (EHC) plan, who attended school or college remained below 11% from 23 March to late May, and reached a weekly average of 26% by the end of the summer term.<sup>11</sup>

9. The Department explained that people had been extremely anxious in the early months of the pandemic and had taken the “stay at home” message seriously, and it had therefore been a challenge to persuade them to send their children to school.<sup>12</sup> It said that it had begun to gather information from schools and colleges on patterns of attendance from the first day of the lockdown, and local authorities had given real-time feedback about any issues or concerns.<sup>13</sup> It told us that the important thing was that school had been available for the children who needed to be there, and stressed that it had supported vulnerable children whether they were in school or not, including via the regional education and children's teams.<sup>14</sup>

10. We asked the Department whether its definition of ‘vulnerable children’ remained relevant in light of the pandemic. The Department explained that two elements of the definition that it used to decide who could access a school place—children with a social worker or an EHC plan—were fixed. But the definition also included an important third category, which was those children whom schools considered vulnerable in other regards. This allowed schools flexibility to take account of factors such as wider home circumstances or mental health issues, and to make sure that places could be made available to the children whom schools knew would suffer if they were not able to access

---

7 Q 10

8 Q 25

9 Q 26

10 Qq 11, 25

11 C&AG's Report, paras 2.3, 2.5

12 Q 51

13 Q 24

14 Q 51

face-to-face education.<sup>15</sup> We challenged the Department about whether schools generally understood and felt empowered to apply this aspect of the definition. The Department agreed to consider whether its guidance could have made clearer that schools had this discretion, and what it could do to help make sure that people felt empowered to make those decisions.<sup>16</sup>

11. The number of referrals to children's social care services, during the weeks surveyed between 27 April and 16 August 2020, was around 15% lower than the average for the same period over the previous three years.<sup>17</sup> In its written evidence, the NSPCC told us that, under normal circumstances, universal services like schools and children's centres were vital for detecting and escalating early signs of abuse. It said that there was no national expectation about who was accountable for following up and ensuring children were safe if they did not attend school.<sup>18</sup>

12. The Department told us that there had not been the spike in referrals to children's social care services which many people had expected when schools fully re-opened in September 2020, and that referrals were still around 10% below normal levels year-on-year.<sup>19</sup> It explained that this raised concern about the potential for ongoing hidden harm to children whose families were not in contact with the social care system.<sup>20</sup>

13. The NSPCC also emphasised that school environments were crucial for the educational and social development of children, acting as places of support for their mental health.<sup>21</sup> The Department highlighted that it had put in place a number of sources of support for children's mental health during the lockdown period, and had consistently signposted Public Health England's guidance for parents and professionals. In particular, the Department spoke about the 'wellbeing for education return' programme that it had set up for September 2020, which funded expert training for every local authority area to help education staff to respond to the emotional and mental health pressures that some children had faced as a result of the pandemic.<sup>22</sup> The Department also said that it welcomed the announcement of additional funding from the Department of Health and Social Care to accelerate the roll-out of mental health support teams in schools.<sup>23</sup>

## Supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities

14. On 1 May 2020, the Department temporarily changed aspects of the law on EHC needs assessments and plans, to give local authorities, health commissioning bodies, education providers and other bodies more flexibility in the context of the pandemic. These changes temporarily removed the requirement to complete assessments and plans within a fixed timeframe, and responsible bodies were required only to use their 'reasonable endeavours' to secure the provision within an EHC plan.<sup>24</sup> In its written evidence, SENSE (a national charity for those living with complex disabilities) told us that, while it understood the need

---

15 Q 56

16 Q 57

17 C&AG's Report, para 2.8

18 COE0026 NSPCC submission, pages 1–2

19 Q 54

20 Q 52

21 COE0026 NSPCC submission, page 4

22 Q 55

23 Q 85

24 C&AG's Report, para 1.14

to relieve pressure on schools, local authorities and health commissioners, the changes had left families without the care and support they relied on to look after their disabled children safely. It also told us that many children's support had not been fully reinstated, despite the temporary legal changes no longer being in place.<sup>25</sup>

15. Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who had an EHC plan were eligible to continue attending school throughout the pandemic, provided a risk assessment had determined that they would be at least as safe in school as at home.<sup>26</sup> However, SENSE told us that the guidance on how these risk assessments should be conducted or what should be included was insufficient and vague. It said that many of the children it supported had been automatically assessed as being safer at home, and had not been able to access the support they usually received at school, putting them in a vulnerable position. It also suggested that, in some cases, the risk assessments were carried out without the knowledge of, or input from, families.<sup>27</sup> The Department explained that it exercised oversight of these issues through local authorities, who took the lead on EHC plans and risk assessments.<sup>28</sup> In subsequent written evidence, the Department said that it had not asked local authorities to inform it of the outcome of their risk assessments and therefore it did not know how many children these assessments had placed at home.<sup>29</sup>

16. We asked the Department why some schools had felt unable to offer places to children with EHC plans. It told us that the situation changed over the course of the pandemic – for example, attendance of children with EHC plans grew from about 5% in March 2020 to 27% by June, and during the period of disrupted schooling which started in January 2021 the figure was around 37%. But the Department also conceded that there had been regional and school-to-school variation in attendance. It told us that schools' levels of confidence in making judgements on which children were safe to attend school varied, and that in the future it might look at how to improve the advice and support available to help schools make these decisions.<sup>30</sup>

17. Written evidence we received made it clear that some children with SEND struggled to learn remotely. SENSE told us that home learning resources were not always appropriate or tailored to the needs of children with complex disabilities, and that many children were left without the specialist equipment they needed, making it more difficult for them to communicate and learn remotely.<sup>31</sup> The Institute of Education at the University of Reading highlighted how some parents had to adapt learning materials sent by schools to fit their child's needs or source alternative materials from elsewhere.<sup>32</sup>

18. We asked the Department what actions it had taken to help children with SEND to learn from home. It told us that it recognised many children with SEND faced real difficulties in learning remotely. As examples of actions it had taken, it highlighted: the SEND-specific provision offered by Oak National Academy which had been welcomed because it allowed people to work at their own pace; expertise on SEND remote education

---

25 COE0014 SENSE submission, page 4

26 C&AG's Report, para 2.3

27 COE0014 SENSE submission, page 3

28 Q 76

29 Letter to Committee from DfE dated 22 April 2021

30 Q 76

31 COE0014 SENSE submission, pages 5–6

32 COE0022 University of Reading submission, pages 3–4

highlighted by its programme for demonstrating good practice in the use of education technology; and SEND-specific components of online training for remote education it was providing to schools.<sup>33</sup>

19. We asked the Department whether it was evaluating the impact of not being able to attend school on the health of children with SEND. In subsequent written evidence, it told us that it would continue to assess the impact of the pandemic and its COVID-19 recovery plans on all pupils, including those with SEND, to ensure that it targeted its support effectively.<sup>34</sup> In addition, during the oral evidence session, the Department said that, in planning for future disruption, it wanted to look at how it had worked jointly with the Department of Health and Social Care—for example, on the identification of clinically extremely vulnerable children.<sup>35</sup>

### Provision of IT equipment

20. The Department recognised that a lack of IT equipment was likely to hamper the ability of vulnerable and disadvantaged children to learn remotely and access online social care services. It initially considered providing 602,000 laptops or tablets and 100,000 4G routers for vulnerable children and those in all priority groups who did not have access. However, it decided to cut back these plans due to the difficulty of supplying devices on this scale. By the end of the summer term, it had delivered almost 215,000 laptops or tablets and 50,000 routers for children with a social worker and care leavers, and for disadvantaged children in year 10.<sup>36</sup> The Department confirmed that, during the early phase of the pandemic, it had focused on supporting children at greatest risk and those who were facing exams in the following year.<sup>37</sup>

21. The Department continued to distribute IT equipment during the 2020/21 school year, focusing on disadvantaged children whose schooling had been disrupted or who had been advised to shield for medical reasons.<sup>38</sup> The Department told us that by spring 2021 it had distributed nearly 1.3 million devices and that orders were now coming to an end, indicating that schools had enough devices to cover all of their children who were eligible for free school meals.<sup>39</sup> The Department said that this provision represented an investment of £400 million in IT equipment for schools.<sup>40</sup>

22. In their written evidence, the National Association of Head Teachers and The Children's Society told us that the limited scope of the Department's provision in the spring and summer of 2020 meant that many children did not have the devices or internet access they needed.<sup>41</sup> The Department told us that it had been up against global supply constraints, meaning that it had not been able to distribute equipment as quickly as it had wanted. We asked the Department about reports of large families having to share one laptop between many children. The Department explained that if all the children in

---

33 Qq 78–80

34 Qq 112–113; Letter to Committee from DfE dated 22 April 2021

35 Q 77

36 C&AG's Report, paras 2.18, 2.19 and Figure 6

37 Q 58

38 C&AG's Report, para 2.22

39 Q 58

40 Q 66

41 COE0003 National Association of Head Teachers submission, page 4; COE0011 Children's Society submission, pages 3–4

a family were receiving free school meals, it would hold information on them separately, and each would be eligible to receive a device. It said that schools were still (at the time we took evidence on 25 March) able to order more devices if they needed them.<sup>42</sup>

23. We asked the Department about its plan for remote learning in the future since the laptops that had been distributed would need replacing in due course. The Department told us that the pandemic had shown that there was an appetite for support from the Department. It aimed to provide guidance and information, in particular to build knowledge among schools about what good-quality remote education looks like. But the Department also noted that there was a balance to be struck between doing things centrally and allowing schools the autonomy to make their own choices.<sup>43</sup>

24. The Department clarified that schools or local authorities owned the devices that had been supplied. They would need to decide how to deal with obsolescence and maintain the provision of up-to-date equipment for pupils, using their core budgets.<sup>44</sup>

---

42 Q 60

43 Qq 61–62

44 Qq 64–66



## 2 Catch-up learning

---

### Learning loss

25. We received written evidence from a number of research bodies indicating that disadvantaged children had suffered most as a result of the disruption to schooling. A survey by the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that, on average, students from disadvantaged backgrounds spent less time on remote learning and were less likely to have access to online classes, home technology and a quiet study space.<sup>45</sup> The Institute for Social and Economic Research also found that children in the most advantaged families, who had their own computer, spent more time on school work than disadvantaged children, who had to share a computer.<sup>46</sup>

26. Evidence from the National Foundation for Educational Research, based on estimates by teachers in July 2020, indicated that on average the learning gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers had increased by 46%. Teachers in the most deprived schools were also over three times more likely to report that their pupils were four months or more behind in their curriculum-related learning, compared with teachers in the least deprived schools.<sup>47</sup> Interim findings from the Department's own research found that pupils in secondary schools with high levels of free school meal eligibility experienced 2.2 months of reading learning loss, compared with 1.5 months in schools with low levels of eligibility.<sup>48</sup>

27. We challenged the Department on why it had not set basic expectations for schools' provision during the 2019/20 summer term. It highlighted that the circumstances had been unprecedented, and that schools had been asked to work in entirely new ways, remaining open to vulnerable children and children of critical workers but closing to other children. In this context, the Department had felt it was right to relieve pressure on schools and "ask less, not more in that moment". The Department explained that it had also needed to learn what good looked like under those circumstances, and that it would have been a challenge early in the pandemic to set out expectations that were well founded. However, it conceded that in hindsight, if it had understood how long the period of disruption would last, it might have done something different in the expectations it had set out.<sup>49</sup>

### Catch-up learning programme

28. In June 2020, to help make up for the learning that children had lost during the disruption to schooling, the Department announced £1 billion of funding for a catch-up learning programme. The programme includes a £650 million universal catch-up premium allocated to schools on a per-pupil basis, and a £350 million National Tutoring Programme (NTP) targeted at disadvantaged children.<sup>50</sup> The Department set out a further £700 million in February 2021, including: a £302 million 'recovery premium' for

---

45 COE0029 Institute for Fiscal Studies submission, page 2

46 COE0027 Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex submission, page 2

47 COE0025 National Foundation for Educational Research submission, page 5

48 C&AG's Report, para 3.5

49 Qq 46–48

50 C&AG's Report, paras 3.7–3.8



schools; a further £200 million to expand the tutoring programme and support language development in early years settings; and £200 million for secondary schools to provide summer schools for those pupils who need it most.<sup>51</sup>

29. The Department told us that it was determined that the catch-up learning programme should address the widening attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. For example, it explained that its focus for the 'academic mentors' scheme was on schools with a high number of pupils eligible for free school meals. In addition, it said that, while the 2020/21 catch-up premium was based on overall pupil numbers, the 2021/22 recovery premium funding would be based on numbers of pupils eligible for pupil premium and thereby explicitly targeted at deprivation.<sup>52</sup>

30. We asked the Department how it would know that the catch-up programme was working. It said that evaluation would be a central part of the development of the NTP, and that success would be achieved if the schemes reached large numbers of children who would benefit from tutoring and if those children made significant progress as a result. The Department has commissioned independent evaluations of the NTP 'tuition partners' and academic mentors schemes, and an independent research study into how schools are using catch-up premium funds. However, the Department did not tell us more precisely what indicators it would use to judge the effectiveness of individual schemes or the catch-up programme as a whole.<sup>53</sup>

## National Tutoring Programme

31. The Department told us that past evaluations by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) had shown that tutoring programmes could help children make between three and five months' progress in their learning.<sup>54</sup> The Department has provided £80 million for the NTP tuition partners scheme in 2020/21. The scheme is aimed at disadvantaged children and covers 75% of the costs of one-to-one and small group tuition, with schools funding the remainder of the costs. The scheme is being led by EEF and tutoring is provided by 33 tuition partners. The Department expects the scheme to reach between 200,000 and 250,000 children in the 2020/21 school year.<sup>55</sup>

32. The Department said that tutoring had the potential to be an important and lasting part of the educational landscape.<sup>56</sup> However, it acknowledged that the tutoring market was developing, and that securing enough tutors and developing the workforce was a challenge for providers.<sup>57</sup> It accepted that it was difficult to get access to good-quality tutoring provision in the places where it was most needed, but it believed that a benefit of establishing a large national programme and therefore a demand for tutors would be the creation of tutoring capacity in places where there might not otherwise be any.<sup>58</sup> The Department told us that individuals did not need to have teaching qualifications in order

---

51 C&AG's Report, para 3.19

52 Q 72

53 Qq 91–92; C&AG's Report, paras 3.12 and 3.14

54 Qq 68, 92

55 C&AG's Report, para 3.15 and Figure 8

56 Q 88

57 Qq 95–96

58 Q 97

to become a tutor, but explained that it wanted there to be a minimum quality standard so that schools had access to good-quality provision. It said that EEF had assessed every tutoring provider that had applied to be part of the scheme.<sup>59</sup>

33. Although the tuition partners scheme is intended to support disadvantaged children, the Department has not specified what proportion of children accessing the scheme should be eligible for pupil premium. At February 2021, just 44% of children receiving tuition were eligible for pupil premium funding, raising questions over whether the scheme would reach the most disadvantaged children.<sup>60</sup> We also received written evidence which raised concerns over whether the scheme was large enough to reach potentially between 1.2 million and 2 million children in need of support.<sup>61</sup>

34. Alongside the NTP tuition partners scheme, the Department is funding an academic mentors scheme led by Teach First, which aims to place between 1,000 and 1,200 mentors in disadvantaged schools in the 2020/21 school year. However, at February 2021, more than 600 schools who had requested a mentor had not been given one.<sup>62</sup> The Department said that Teach First had done well in recruiting mentors so far, but accepted that schools had made more requests for mentors than the scheme was able to meet. It said that this demonstrated the challenge of recruiting enough mentors, and told us that it wanted to increase the number of mentors in future years.<sup>63</sup>

---

59 Qq 98–103

60 C&AG's Report, para 3.15

61 COE0013 Professor Lee Elliot-Major and Mr Andrew Eyles submission, page 7

62 C&AG's Report, para 3.16

63 Qq 93–94

# Formal minutes

---

**Thursday 20 May 2021**

Virtual meeting

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Olivia Blake

Peter Grant

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown

Craig Mackinlay

Dan Carter

James Wild

Draft Report (*COVID-19: Support for children's education*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 34 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Third of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Monday 24 May at 1:45pm]

## Witnesses

---

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Thursday 25 March 2021

**Susan Acland-Hood**, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education; **Andrew McCully**, Director General for Early Years and School Groups, Department for Education; **Mike Pettifer**, Director of COVID Response, Department for Education [Q1-114](#)

## Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

COE numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Asbury, Dr Kathryn (Senior Lecturer in Psychology in Education, University of York) ([COE0018](#))
- 2 Atan, Dr Denize (Consultant Senior Lecturer, University of Bristol) ([COE0019](#))
- 3 Blanden, Dr Jo (Reader in Economics , University of Surrey) ([COE0017](#))
- 4 British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD) ([COE0012](#))
- 5 Catholic Education Service ([COE0007](#))
- 6 Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) ([COE0021](#))
- 7 The Children's Society ([COE0011](#))
- 8 Clayton C ([COE0028](#))
- 9 Clayton R ([COE0028](#))
- 10 Crawford, Dr Claire (Reader in Economics, University of Birmingham and Institute for Fiscal Studies) ([COE0017](#))
- 11 Demkowicz, Dr Ola (Lecturer in Psychology of Education, Manchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester) ([COE0020](#))
- 12 Elliot-Major, Professor Lee (Professor of Social Mobility, University of Exeter) ([COE0013](#))
- 13 Equality and Human Rights Commission ([COE0024](#))
- 14 Eyles, Mr Andrew (Research economist, London School of Economics) ([COE0013](#))
- 15 Fumagalli, Dr Laura (Research Fellow, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex) ([COE0017](#))
- 16 Gillies, Mr Max (Postgraduate Researcher, University of Bristol) ([COE0019](#))
- 17 Guggenheim, Professor Jeremy (Professor in Myopia Research, Cardiff University) ([COE0019](#))
- 18 Hanley, Dr Terry (Reader in Counselling Psychology, Manchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester) ([COE0020](#))
- 19 The Health Inequalities Policy Research Team at the University of Liverpool ([COE0009](#))
- 20 Institute for Fiscal Studies ([COE0029](#))
- 21 Just Fair ([COE0021](#))
- 22 Kim, Dr Lisa (Lecturer in Psychology in Education, University of York) ([COE0018](#))
- 23 Local Government Association (LGA) ([COE0006](#))
- 24 Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester ([COE0020](#))
- 25 McCaldin, Dr Tee (Lecturer in Education, Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester) ([COE0020](#))
- 26 NAHT ([COE0003](#))
- 27 National Foundation for Educational Research ([COE0025](#))

- 28 National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Child (NSPCC) ([COE0026](#))
- 29 Oxford Brookes University ([COE0010](#))
- 30 Potter, M ([COE0028](#))
- 31 Protection Approaches ([COE0023](#))
- 32 Rabe, Dr Birgitta (Reader, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex) ([COE0017](#))
- 33 Sense ([COE0014](#))
- 34 Social Mobility Foundation ([COE0001](#))
- 35 Suicide and Self-Harm Research Group in the School of Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University ([COE0015](#))
- 36 Understanding Society, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex ([COE0027](#))
- 37 University of Bristol ([COE0004](#))
- 38 University of Bristol, School of Education ([COE0002](#))
- 39 University of Huddersfield ([COE0005](#))
- 40 University of Huddersfield ([COE0008](#))
- 41 University of Leeds ([COE0016](#))
- 42 University of Leeds ([COE0010](#))
- 43 University of Oxford ([COE0010](#))
- 44 University of Reading ([COE0022](#))
- 45 West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner ([COE0030](#))
- 46 Williams, Dr Cathy (Associate Professor, Paediatric Ophthalmology, University of Bristol) ([COE0019](#))
- 47 Woods, Professor Kevin (Professor of Educational and Child Psychology, Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester) ([COE0020](#))

# List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

---

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

## Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Low emission cars	HC 186
2nd	BBC strategic financial management	HC 187

## Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities	HC 85
2nd	Defence Nuclear Infrastructure	HC 86
3rd	High Speed 2: Spring 2020 Update	HC 84
4th	EU Exit: Get ready for Brexit Campaign	HC 131
5th	University technical colleges	HC 87
6th	Excess votes 2018–19	HC 243
7th	Gambling regulation: problem gambling and protecting vulnerable people	HC 134
8th	NHS capital expenditure and financial management	HC 344
9th	Water supply and demand management	HC 378
10th	Defence capability and the Equipment Plan	HC 247
11th	Local authority investment in commercial property	HC 312
12th	Management of tax reliefs	HC 379
13th	Whole of Government Response to COVID-19	HC 404
14th	Readying the NHS and social care for the COVID-19 peak	HC 405
15th	Improving the prison estate	HC 244
16th	Progress in remediating dangerous cladding	HC 406
17th	Immigration enforcement	HC 407
18th	NHS nursing workforce	HC 408
19th	Restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster	HC 549
20th	Tackling the tax gap	HC 650
21st	Government support for UK exporters	HC 679
22nd	Digital transformation in the NHS	HC 680
23rd	Delivering carrier strike	HC 684

<b>Number</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Reference</b>
24th	Selecting towns for the Towns Fund	HC 651
25th	Asylum accommodation and support transformation programme	HC 683
26th	Department of Work and Pensions Accounts 2019–20	HC 681
27th	Covid-19: Supply of ventilators	HC 685
28th	The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's management of the Magnox contract	HC 653
29th	Whitehall preparations for EU Exit	HC 682
30th	The production and distribution of cash	HC 654
31st	Starter Homes	HC 88
32nd	Specialist Skills in the civil service	HC 686
33rd	Covid-19: Bounce Back Loan Scheme	HC 687
34th	Covid-19: Support for jobs	HC 920
35th	Improving Broadband	HC 688
36th	HMRC performance 2019–20	HC 690
37th	Whole of Government Accounts 2018–19	HC 655
38th	Managing colleges' financial sustainability	HC 692
39th	Lessons from major projects and programmes	HC 694
40th	Achieving government's long-term environmental goals	HC 927
41st	COVID 19: the free school meals voucher scheme	HC 689
42nd	COVID-19: Government procurement and supply of Personal Protective Equipment	HC 928
43rd	COVID-19: Planning for a vaccine Part 1	HC 930
44th	Excess Votes 2019–20	HC 1205
45th	Managing flood risk	HC 931
46th	Achieving Net Zero	HC 935
47th	COVID-19: Test, track and trace (part 1)	HC 932
48th	Digital Services at the Border	HC 936
49th	COVID-19: housing people sleeping rough	HC 934
50th	Defence Equipment Plan 2020–2030	HC 693
51st	Managing the expiry of PFI contracts	HC 1114
52nd	Key challenges facing the Ministry of Justice	HC 1190
53rd	Covid 19: supporting the vulnerable during lockdown	HC 938
54th	Improving single living accommodation for service personnel	HC 940
55th	Environmental tax measures	HC 937
56th	Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund	HC 941