

Written evidence submitted by the New Schools Network

Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds

New Schools Network (NSN) is a charity improving the life chances of young people across the country by supporting the creation of new free schools. NSN finds talented people and organisations, supports them to establish new free schools in their communities and, through the Academy Ambassadors Programme, supports better governance by finding business leaders with the right skills to become trustees.

NSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Education Select Committee inquiry.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has created new issues in our education system and exacerbated existing divides. NSN is particularly concerned about:

- The widening divide between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.
- Exacerbating regional inequalities.
- The long-term impact on the drive towards social mobility.

While it is clear that COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, an unprecedented effect on public services, this crisis provides an opportunity to evaluate new methods to maximise their impact in helping those in need. As this submission will outline, free schools have demonstrated that they can be a driver of meaningful change in communities, which are economically and educationally disadvantaged. This gives NSN a unique insight into the community-based approaches needed to bridge the widening attainment gap and provide adaptability to a sector, which has undergone profound changes due to COVID-19.

Definitions

- **White:** Unless otherwise specified, the term 'white' is used to refer to the broad category as identified by the Department for Education (DfE) and all five ethnicities that come under this term.
- **Disadvantaged:** 'Disadvantaged pupils' refers to those that attract government pupil premium funding, have claimed free school meals at any point in the last six years, and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.
- **A note on free school meals:** Free school meal eligibility has been used as a primary metric in determining pupils considered to be 'left behind'. This does not fully capture the full

range of deprivation that can affect pupils, but is the socio-economic indicator used in the DfE's pupil characteristics data on which much of our submission is based.

Recommendations

- The Government should commit to funding future waves of free schools and alternative provision schools targeted in disadvantaged areas to provide a high quality education to every pupil in the country, including white disadvantaged pupils.
 - Allow for the free schools programme to expand into areas where there may not be basic need, but where there are a high proportion of disadvantaged white pupils not well served by existing schools.
 - Establish a new wave of alternative provision free schools.
 - Review the data collection and research conducted into these cohorts.
 - Continue to implement measures to ensure disadvantaged pupils, including white pupils, are not disproportionately affected by COVID-19 by subsidising internet access/devices for disadvantaged pupils; extending free school meal provision; and ensuring 2021 assessment arrangements consider disadvantaged white pupils.
- The DfE should provide greater clarity on how short-term solutions to mitigate the educational impacts of the COVID-19 crisis will be sustained in the long-term, with special consideration for white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as other vulnerable groups.
- Efforts should be made to collect more robust data on white disadvantaged cohorts throughout all school years to best inform future policy decisions.

New Schools Network's view

In the Government's 2019 manifesto, levelling up regions of the country which were previously economically distressed was a priority. Areas which have a high education deprivation ranking should be allowed an accelerated opening process for free schools.

Free schools have demonstrated that they are able to respond to the needs of a community, and are now the highest performing type of state school at Key Stages, 1, 4 and 5, as well as being more likely to be rated as Outstanding by Ofsted.

They have also demonstrated particular success with disadvantaged pupils: nearly 10% more disadvantaged pupils attending free schools achieve grades 5-9 in maths and English GCSE compared to their peers in other state schools. Progress for primary pupils at Key Stage 2 is also higher for disadvantaged pupils in free schools compared to disadvantaged pupils on average.

There is no singular national solution to the issue of low attainment for disadvantaged white children; we need to find an answer that works for the particular context of each local community and region. In light of this, local communities should be empowered and supported to find a solution that is right for them.

Generally, free school cohorts consist of more black and ethnic minority disadvantaged pupils rather than white pupils, which is likely due to their current geographical spread. Nonetheless, there are specific examples of free schools that have proven that they can be a driver for change in deprived areas with a predominantly white population. Marine Academy Primary in Plymouth received the SSAT Educational Outcomes Award in 2019 for Pupil Premium pupils in Key Stage 2 achieving high levels of performance. Approximately 87% of children achieved the expected standard in reading, writing, and maths. The Heights Free School is an AP free school, with a majority white British cohort and 41.9% of pupils eligible for free school meals. Its first Ofsted report noted that aspirations among pupils were high, and that they spoke positively about their futures. At Bedford Free School, white boys perform well above the national average at Progress 8, with a score of +0.92.

But the impact of free schools has not yet been spread equitably. At present, free schools are concentrated in London and the south. Approximately 33% free schools are in London and the South, compared to just 17% in the Midlands. Of free schools in the pre-opening pipeline, 46% are in London and the South, and just 17% are in the Midlands. The Government must do more to recognise and celebrate the transformative impact of free schools, and do more to encourage appropriate groups to open free schools in areas that would most benefit across the North and

Midlands. DfE data shows almost 50% of Local Authorities with a free school scored better Progress 8 scores between 2017 and 2019, but only 21% of LAs without a free school improved¹. The Government should use the disruption caused by COVID-19 as an opportunity to reignite education policy so that disadvantaged children, and the specific challenges that they face, may be addressed through long-term, systemic change.

NSN recommends the Government commit to funding future waves of free schools targeted in disadvantaged areas to provide a high quality education to every pupil in the country, including white disadvantaged pupils.

Alongside a broad recommendation to commit to opening more free schools in the areas that would most benefit from them, NSN recommends additional changes:

- 1. Allow for the free school programme to expand into areas where there may not be basic need, but where there is a high proportion of disadvantaged white pupils are not well served by existing schools.**

The application process for setting up new free schools has become increasingly prescriptive, which is preventing the programme from fulfilling its original aims to improve standards of education and address education inequality. The application criteria have always taken into account the need for a new school, but historically, this has been a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the factors that mean a new school is needed in an area. The most recent waves have put undue emphasis on demographic or basic need, and no longer take into account parental demand for increased choice.

There are fourteen Local Authorities that have a predominantly white pupil population (80-100% as recorded in the DfE's pupil characteristics data²), and an above average proportion of free school meal claimants, that do not currently have a free school. One of these is Knowsley, which is the worst performing area for Progress 8 and Attainment 8 scores for white pupils. However, under the most recent free school application criteria, it would not be possible for a free school to be approved to open.

This is not good enough. To support the most vulnerable cohorts, consideration should be given to educational standards and parental choice, as well as demographic need.

¹ DfE: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/find-a-school-in-england>

² This has been calculated by comparing the total number of pupils classified as any white ethnic group to the total of all pupils with a recorded ethnicity (including those categorised as 'unclassified')

Moreover, these schools should be established by those who understand their communities the best; this could be local schools, but could also be local charities and other individual stakeholders. In recent years the free schools programme has moved away from its original aim of allowing community groups to establish schools and all 22 approved providers in wave 13 were existing trusts.

While its cohort is not predominately white disadvantaged pupils, Reach Academy Feltham still provides a strong example of the power that community led free schools can have. The Outstanding rated free school has since established a Children's Hub that aims to offer 'cradle to career' support for children and parents across the community. Encouraging and enabling community leaders to come together to propose new, innovative solutions to local issues has the potential to address many of the challenges faced by left behind white pupils. Future mainstream free school waves should:

- Allow applicants to provide evidence of one of: demographic need; low educational standards; or parental and community demand for increased choice.
- Assess capacity and capability of individuals in the team, rather than the educational track record and capacity of an existing trust, to encourage new providers to enter the system.
- Provide additional pre-opening funding for new providers that lack the resource that existing trusts have, to mitigate the additional risks.
- Remove shortened application criteria for trusts replicating their existing model, and incentivise academy trusts to propose innovative and tailored approaches to local issues, e.g. by partnering with local organisations as a condition of approval.

2. Establish a new wave of alternative provision free schools.

The DfE should introduce an open, centrally-managed alternative provision application wave, similar to the mainstream process. The current process is not working to prioritise the approval of alternative provision free schools, due to the significant differences between Local Authority duties for pupils with special educational needs and those that have been excluded.

The Timpson Review³ highlighted that there is demand from mainstream schools to seek early intervention for their pupils, but often alternative provision places are already taken by young people that have been permanently excluded. Many successful alternative provision free schools work with vulnerable pupils at risk of exclusion, providing intervention commissioned by their

³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf

mainstream school. An open, centrally managed application wave for alternative provision free schools, similar to the mainstream process, would allow a new generation of alternative provision free schools to offer preventative support to pupils at risk of exclusion, as they would be led by commissioning schools in partnership with the local authority. This would help better support Roma/Gypsy and Irish Traveller heritage pupils in particular, who are disproportionately at risk of exclusion.

3. Review the data collection and research conducted into these cohorts.

The Government should convene new studies into white disadvantaged pupils across all year groups and regions to improve the overall understanding of why this cohort underachieves. As shown from the data used in this submission, many of the most comprehensive studies into this cohort were undertaken over five years ago. While census and other government data do include a breakdown of pupils eligible for free school meals and ethnicity for each school, these are not cross referenced. While assumptions can be made about the demographic of disadvantaged pupils based on the overall demographics of the area (as has been presented in this submission), this lacks accuracy and does not account for cases where the disadvantaged cohort in a predominantly white school may actually consist mostly of ethnic minority pupils.

A review should be undertaken into the recommendations made in 2010 to support Gypsy/Roma pupils. There is little evidence to suggest much has changed for this cohort over the last ten years, as shown by the overrepresentation of this group in alternative provision settings and persistent absence figures.

4. Continue to implement measures to ensure disadvantaged pupils, including white pupils, are not disproportionately affected by COVID-19 by:

- **Subsidising internet access/devices for disadvantaged pupils:** The Government's commitment to supplying devices for disadvantaged pupils during the COVID-19 crisis was welcome, but the problems associated with lost learning for many pupils who did not have access will continue to burden their life chances far beyond the pandemic. Additional funding should continue to be made available to schools in the most deprived areas to ensure that disadvantaged pupils have access to internet and devices at home, during the academic year and school holidays, enabling them to supplement learning at home, as their more advantaged peers are able to do.
- **FSM provision:** Although the FSM voucher scheme was flawed when first delivered, an improved, refined system should remain in place throughout and beyond the pandemic. Pupils eligible for FSM are likely to suffer further from increased parental unemployment as

a result of the pandemic, and provision should also remain available while there is risk of enforced self-isolation, so that at no point does any young person eligible for FSM go without food during the pandemic.

- **Consider Ofqual’s findings to ensure FSM pupils get a fair opportunity:** Rightly, concern was raised about unconscious bias negatively impacting ethnic minority pupils when it came to submitted predicted grades over the summer. While a decision on 2021 assessment is still to be made, the DfE should keep in mind bias and lost learning for vulnerable groups, including disadvantaged white pupils and those that may also be negatively impacted by unconscious bias, such as Gypsy/Roma pupils or those from Irish Traveller backgrounds.

The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis will exacerbate the attainment gap and further impact children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Education Endowment Foundation recently warned that progress made over the last decade to narrow the attainment gap by approximately 10% could be reversed by school closures⁴.

While pupils were learning at home under the lockdown, the Government had little visibility as to how consistent provision offered by different schools was – and how schools in areas of high disadvantage were able to offer remote learning if a child lacked internet access and/or an appropriate device. A divide in internet connectivity across the country can heavily impacts a pupil’s ability for self-study and attainment levels in examinations. According to the ONS, approximately 6.6% of homes in the UK are without a decent internet connection and approximately 5 million people do not use the internet at all⁵. The Sutton Trust has found that university applicants from working class backgrounds are twice as likely to have insufficient access to the internet and devices, which would assist them in their studies⁶.

The impact of inequitable digital access was clearest following school closures in March 2020. At a time when pupils were only able to access learning via the internet, inequity of access to both devices and connectivity saw these gaps becoming further entrenched. While an emergence of innovative solutions to home learning, such as the Oak National Academy or a number of free schools providing students with devices and recording almost 100% online attendance, it is likely that nationally the pupils who would benefit most from this provision lacked access to it.

⁴ Financial Times: <https://www.ft.com/content/50fcc605-674d-4630-9718-d3890eccffbf>

⁵ ONS:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2019>

⁶ Sutton Trust: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-and-Social-Mobility-Impact-Brief-2.pdf>

The impact of closures will plague the sector for a number of years and policy makers need to ensure this remains at the forefront of their decisions.

A report by the Sutton Trust looking into the impact of the lockdown found that “in the most deprived schools, 15% of teachers thought more than a third of their students would not have adequate access to a device”.⁷ The long-term impact of this lost learning will be difficult to quantify until all schools are teaching all students at all times. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), children from wealthier families were spending 30% more time on home learning than those from poorer families.⁸

The Government’s laptop and router scheme, which aimed to supply approximately 200,000 devices to disadvantaged pupils, was heavily criticised by school leaders as the number provided was inadequate to meet need. This was highlighted when NSN gave oral evidence to the Committee earlier in the year.

We have also seen the labour market heavily impacted by COVID-19, with an estimated 27% of workers furloughed in the first months of lockdown and unemployment increasing by approximately 70% to 2.1 million in the same period⁹. KPMG, an international audit and tax advisory firm, has warned that the number of those unemployed will continue to rise¹⁰ and as further restrictions are put in place through autumn and winter, this is likely to continue.

A major concern is the impact this will have on child poverty rates, which were already increasing before the pandemic. According to the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), in the last decade, the number of children living in poverty has risen by approximately 600,000¹¹. There are of course multiple metrics to consider when defining poverty. In relation to low household income, white pupils are one of the least affected ethnic groups – however, persistent low income still affects some 10% of all white pupils¹². Nationwide, white British families are more likely than other ethnicities to be in receipt of benefits¹³; the crisis has seen claims for Universal Credit soar, suggesting children in white families may be particularly vulnerable to low household income.

There is also concern that youth unemployment will rise substantially, potentially to 600,000 this year according to the Resolution Foundation¹⁴. From figures collected in 2016, of those aged

⁷ Sutton Trust: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Impact-Brief-School-Shutdown.pdf>

⁸ Institute for Fiscal Studies <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14849>

⁹ CityAM: <https://www.cityam.com/ons-job-vacancies-sank-as-uk-entered-coronavirus-lockdown/>

¹⁰ KPMG: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/coronavirus-unemployment-jobs-work-impact-g7-pandemic/>

¹¹ CPAG: <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/child-poverty-continues-rise-pandemic-response-falls-short-families>

¹² ONS:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/february2020/childpovertyandeducationoutcomesbyethnicity>

¹³ Gov.uk: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/benefits/state-support/latest>

¹⁴ Resolution Foundation: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/05/Class-of-2020.pdf>

between 16 and 25, white young people accounted for the second lowest rates of people 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training' (NEET) (5.6%). When looking at the numbers of inactivity (i.e. those not actively searching for a job), young white people were the fourth highest group (7.3%)¹⁵. There is a risk the economic legacy of the pandemic will serve to further demotivate this cohort, who may struggle to see the value in looking for employment or furthering their education if fewer opportunities are available to them.

Another issue exacerbated by COVID-19 is food inequality among disadvantaged families. A report by King's College London suggests the number of adults that are 'food insecure' in Britain has quadrupled since the start of the crisis, and that adults with FSM eligible children are at a heightened risk of insecurity.¹⁶ The voucher system introduced by the Government allowing schools to provide children in receipt of FSM with a coupon was heavily criticized by school leaders and parents. The flawed system has already been a topic of Committee questions, so this submission will not highlight its issues again. Although it is worth noting the potential health legacy this may have had on the most vulnerable students, and the continued impact this may have on disadvantaged students that are told to self-isolate for 14 days.

Other safeguarding concerns have been raised by the NSPCC, which reported a rise in domestic abuse reports during the COVID-19 crisis¹⁷. School Home Support, a charity which supports disadvantaged pupils, reported an increase of approximately 750% in child referrals this year to social services compared to 2019¹⁸. Government data from 2019 demonstrates that the vast majority of children in need are white (72%)¹⁹; of all children in need, over half had abuse or neglect as the primary reason for being classed as a child in need.²⁰

The mental health and wellbeing of children, particularly disadvantaged children, is also very concerning – especially when considered alongside research conducted before the pandemic that reported vulnerable children were already being repeatedly failed by the current mental health system. A study conducted in 2019 by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) into Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), stated that children with a diagnosable condition, the majority of whom are likely to be white and from low-income families, did not receive adequate support²¹. The

¹⁵ Gov.uk <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/unemployment-and-economic-inactivity/young-people-not-in-employment-education-or-training-neet/latest>

¹⁶ Rachel Loopstra, King's College London https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Report_COVID19FoodInsecurity-final.pdf

¹⁷ Telegraph: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/03/06/nspcc-reports-25-rise-referrals-children-living-domestic-abuse/>

¹⁸ The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/23/vulnerable-children-suffer-alone-in-uk-lockdown-with-schools-shut>

¹⁹ DfE:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/843046/Characteristics_of_children_in_need_2018_to_2019_main_text.pdf

²⁰ DfE:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/843046/Characteristics_of_children_in_need_2018_to_2019_main_text.pdf

²¹ Education Policy Institute <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/access-to-child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-in-2019/>

Lancet also noted that while the loss of routine during the pandemic would affect all pupils, it would affect those with mental health issues the worst²².

When taking all of these factors into consideration, there is a very real concern the long-term impact of the pandemic – in terms of schooling, economy, mental and physical health – are all likely to disproportionately affect disadvantaged white students. It is imperative the DfE prioritises mitigating these factors, both to quash the immediate impact of the pandemic but also to ensure long-lasting change.

NSN recommends the DfE provide greater clarity on how short-term solutions to mitigate the educational impacts of the COVID-19 crisis will be sustained in the long-term, with special consideration for white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as other vulnerable groups.

The extent of underachievement for white pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), white British children are less likely to live in poverty than children from other ethnic groups²³, but this masks the significant challenges faced by white pupils that *are* living in poverty.

Data demonstrate that by the time white pupils eligible for FSM sit their GCSEs, they continually underperform when compared to other ethnicities. Of this cohort, white boys perform the worst²⁴. The DfE states that children progress less than average if they are FSM eligible (with a Progress 8 score of -0.78). This disparity is particularly stark for white British pupils, who have the second largest gap in average Progress 8 scores between FSM-eligible pupils and those not eligible, at 0.73 points²⁵.

All data below is taken from the Government's Ethnicity Facts and Figures data from 2019:

- At Key Stage 1, white pupils in receipt of FSM tend to do worse in reading, writing, maths and science when compared to others.

²² The Lancet: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30109-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext)

²³ Office of National Statistics: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/february2020/childpovertyandeducationoutcomesbyethnicity>

²⁴ Gov.uk: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/gcse-results-attainment-8-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest>

²⁵ Gov.uk: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182413/DFE-RR096.pdf

- At Key Stage 2, white pupils achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in line with pupils of all ethnicities; yet white pupils in receipt of FSM were less likely to achieve the expected standard than other ethnicities in receipt of FSM.
- At Key Stage 4, underperformance of disadvantaged white pupils is particularly troubling. White pupils in receipt of FSM scored the lowest at Progress 8 (-0.75) and white pupils in general had lower average Progress 8 score than all other pupils (-0.2).
- Looking at the Attainment 8 measure, white pupils receiving FSM present an average score of just 31.6 compared to 47.9 for non-FSM white pupils.
- White pupils on FSM were also the least likely cohort to gain a strong pass (grade 5+) in maths and English GCSEs (17.2%).
- At Key Stage 5, 11% of white pupils achieve three A grades at A level, compared to 12.6% of all pupils. No data is provided with regards to disadvantaged pupils, as free school meal eligibility for young people over 16 is calculated differently to free school meal eligibility²⁶.

Across all levels, white boys generally do worse than white girls in English, maths and science in all age groups, regardless of being in receipt of FSM or not²⁷. Girls achieve higher grades than their male counterparts, though white girls in receipt of FSM achieved marginally lower Progress 8 scores than white girls that do not receive FSM²⁸.

The Government's ethnicity facts and figures service provides high level overviews of how each ethnicity performs across key indicators, including progress in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2, Attainment 8, Progress 8, English Baccalaureate entries, and English and maths at GCSE.

While relevant metrics are captured individually, there are limited data that take into account multiple metrics, such as ethnicity, FSM eligibility, gender, geographic area, and performance together. This makes drawing conclusions about disadvantaged white pupils, rather than white pupils in general, more challenging.

While there is no public measure for pupil outcomes at Key Stage 3, the Government should consider how progress of these pupils could be better tracked between the ages of 11 and 16 to better inform intervention strategies.

NSN recommends more robust data are collected, including regional data on white disadvantaged cohorts throughout all school years including post-16, to better inform future policy decisions.

²⁶ Gov.uk: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/percentage-achieving-a-c-in-english-and-maths/latest>

²⁷ DfE: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2019>

²⁸ DfE: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/pupil-progress-progress-8-between-ages-11-and-16-key-stage-2-to-key-stage-4/latest>

Variation within the cohort of white pupils who are eligible for FSM

DfE figures that breakdown the achievement of pupils eligible for FSM across the five specific ethnic groups provide an accurate picture into their achievements. However, at the present time, DfE statistics do not provide a comprehensive regional breakdown of this cohort. The DfE outlines these groups as:

- English
- Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
- Irish
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Any other White background

There is a wide disparity between these ethnic groups in terms of disadvantage. White British pupils, for example, are the least likely to be living in low-income households, whereas white minority ethnic groups (Gypsy/Roma pupils and those with Irish Traveller heritage) have the highest rates of FSM eligibility of all ethnicities.²⁹

This disparity is also reflected in educational outcomes. According to DfE figures, Irish Traveller heritage or Gypsy/Roma children in receipt of FSM have the lowest Progress 8 scores, lowest rate of achieving strong passes in English and maths, and zero per cent achieve the English Baccalaureate³⁰. The disparity begins early on: at Key Stage 1, this cohort is already significantly behind others. At Key Stage 2, these pupils are least likely to meet both the expected and higher standards.

The DfE published a report into improving outcomes for this cohort in 2010³¹; however, there is little evidence the findings and recommendations have been successfully implemented, as the stark disparity remains.

According to DfE figures, the largest gap between children eligible for FSM and those who are not was recorded in the White Irish cohort, as approximately 24.5% and 59.9% received a strong pass in GCSE English and maths respectively in 2019³². Almost twice as many white pupils who are not

²⁹ Office for National Statistics: Child Poverty and Education Outcomes by ethnicity: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/february2020/childpovertyandeducationoutcomesbyethnicity>

³⁰ DfE: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-performance-2019-revised>

³¹ DfE: [Improving the outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils: final report](#)

³² DfE: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2019>

eligible for FSM attain a pass in GCSE English when compared to those white pupils that receive FSM³³.

Principle factors that contribute to underachievement

The reasons a child underachieves are complex and subject to numerous social, economic and cultural factors. While not exhaustive, NSN hopes that the insights raised in this section will contribute to an advancement in our understanding of the topic.

Our review of publicly available data has found that some groups of white children from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to have the lowest school attendance rates, and in general, disadvantaged children are less likely to attend a school rated Good by Ofsted.

Previous studies³⁴ have offered possible reasons for this underachievement, arguing that white working class children are less likely to benefit from a nurturing home and school environment, and that boys in particular are less likely to see their teacher as a role model.

This is particularly troubling as children with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are more likely to be eligible for FSM, with 28% of SEND pupils eligible for FSM compared to 13% without SEND in 2019. Moreover, SEND is most prevalent in white Irish Heritage travellers (30%) and Gypsy/Roma pupils (26%)³⁵. Gypsy/Roma and Irish Traveller heritage pupils are also overrepresented in both temporary and permanent exclusion figures, and in alternative provision. According to DfE data, these two groups collectively account for 1.5% of all pupils in pupil referral units³⁶, despite Irish Heritage travellers and Gypsy/Roma people making up just 0.1% of the general population of England and Wales (according to the 2011 census).

Data also show children in receipt of FSM are more likely to be absent from school; pupils known to be eligible for and claiming FSM had an overall absence rate of 7.5% in 2019, compared to 4.2% for non-FSM pupils³⁷ and a persistent absence rate of 22.8% which is more than double the rate of non-FSM pupils (8.3%)³⁸. Out of this cohort, white pupils between Key Stages 1 and 4 attend school the least. Travellers of Irish heritage and Gypsy/ Roma pupils, who are in the highest cohort to be in receipt of FSM, had the highest overall absence rates at 18% and 12.6% respectively³⁹.

³³ DfE: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/pupil-progress-progress-8-between-ages-11-and-16-key-stage-2-to-key-stage-4/latest>

³⁴ Lambeth Council and Forward Partnership

³⁵ DfE: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2018-to-2019>

³⁶ DfE: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2019>

³⁷ DfE: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2018-to-2019>

³⁸ DfE: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2018-to-2019>

³⁹ DfE: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2018-to-2019>

According to DfE figures on persistent absence across all schools nationwide, white pupils were most likely to persistently miss school in their primary years and are the second highest ethnicity to do so at secondary. A DfE study into low attendance in primary and secondary school settings stated that those who miss school tend to do worse than their peers and were less likely to go on to further education⁴⁰.

There are also prominent disparities across different regions of the country. DfE research shows white pupils in the North East of England have the lowest Progress 8 scores of all pupils (-0.26)⁴¹.

The impact of geographical factors for this cohort are significant and complex, and warrant further study. NSN notes two factors that may contribute to the underachievement of this cohort in conjunction with other factors and variables:

- **Deprivation:** Indices of deprivation data reveals deprivation is largely concentrated in the North East, North West, pockets of the West Midlands, and some rural and coastal areas in the South of the country.
- **Educational standards:** The quality of education providers differs vastly across the country. According to data compiled by Ofsted looking into nursery, primary, secondary and AP schools across England, approximately 31% of education providers in London are rated Outstanding and 6% Requires Improvement. This compares with only 20% Outstanding and 10% Requires Improvement in the North East, and 21% and 11% respectively in the North West. This contrast is also seen in the East Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber, where 15% and 16% of schools are rated Requires Improvement respectively. Data also shows a school is twice as likely to be judged Requires Improvement in the East and West Midlands than in London⁴², and that more white families live in those area (with London having the smallest white population according to the 2011 census⁴³).

Another factor may be a culture of low aspiration among white disadvantaged pupils. This has been widely debated and an overview of the arguments features in a Committee report from 2015 titled

⁴⁰ <https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/pupils-and-parents/absence-and-attendance/strategies-for-managing-attendance/research-into-how-attendance-can-impact-attainment/>

⁴¹ Office for National Statistics: Child Poverty and Education Outcomes by ethnicity: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/february2020/childpovertyandeducationoutcomesbyethnicity>

⁴² Ofsted: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/761606/29523_Ofsted_Annual_Report_2017-18_041218.pdf

⁴³ Gov.uk: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest>

‘Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children⁴⁴’. The Education Endowment Foundation has echoed this, by finding no clear correlation between interventions to raise aspiration, and increased academic attainment in white pupils.

There is no consensus in available research about the role that parental engagement plays in supporting improved outcomes. However, **low levels of parental engagement in education appears to be a particular challenge for this cohort**. A study by Lambeth Local Authority revealed low parental engagement has historically been an issue in London boroughs, even though white disadvantaged pupils tend to fare better than in other areas of the country. The report states that for white working class children, learning was not always priority at home, with chaotic home lives often proving a barrier to children getting the most from their education. Teachers interviewed for the report noted that white parents were often the least likely to become involved in school life.⁴⁵

It has also been suggested that white male pupils in particular lack supportive role models in school and at home, which negatively impacts their performance. In school, the majority of teachers in primary and secondary education in the UK are white and female⁴⁶. Particularly in early year’s education, there are far fewer male teachers for male pupils to relate to. The role of a parent is also crucial. A parent’s own level of education, as well as their computer literacy, are important factors in their ability to assist their child. Low levels of parental education arguably fuels a cycle of the poorest performing group of school leavers going on to have children who also become part of the same group. According to research from the University of Sussex, children whose parents have a degree are almost a year ahead in maths at Year 11 than those with parents who only have GCSEs⁴⁷.

Impact of underachievement

Low levels of achievement in schools creates a cycle of underachievement both for the individual and the community. According to the deprivation index, education deprivation is generally more concentrated in the North of the country than the South⁴⁸, while the majority of the recipients of free school meals are also based in the North of the country⁴⁹. The ability for white disadvantaged pupils in particular to overcome this initial inequality during their time at, and once they leave, school is limited; the number of white disadvantaged pupils entering the workforce with lower

⁴⁴ House of Commons Library: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/142/142.pdf>

⁴⁵ Lambeth Council:

[https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/rsu/sites/www.lambeth.gov.uk/rsu/files/Raising%20the Achievement of White Working Class Pupils Executive Summary 2010.pdf](https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/rsu/sites/www.lambeth.gov.uk/rsu/files/Raising%20the%20Achievement%20of%20White%20Working%20Class%20Pupils%20Executive%20Summary%202010.pdf)

⁴⁶ Gov.uk: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest>

⁴⁷ University of Sussex: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/52052>

⁴⁸ Gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019#:~:text=The%20English%20indices%20of%20deprivation%20measure%20relative%20deprivation%20in%20small,widely%20used%20of%20these%20indices.>

⁴⁹ Local Government Association https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=2174&mod-area=E92000001&mod-group=AllRegions_England&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup

grades is higher in the North East and West of the country⁵⁰, which are the very areas that have seen a fall in industry and employment in the past 20 years, and may face additional economic challenges following the COVID-19 crisis. The option of further education for these pupils is also limited: approximately half of universities nationwide admitted less than 5% of white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in 2019, according to a report from the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)⁵¹.

NSN recommends the Government commit to funding future waves of free schools and alternative provision schools targeted in disadvantaged areas to provide a high quality education to every pupil in the country, including white disadvantaged pupils.

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⁵⁰ DfE: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/find-a-school-in-england>

⁵¹ NEON: <https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/news/new-report-shows-differences-in-white-working-class-students-going-to-university-by-higher-education-provider/>