

Written evidence submitted by New Schools Network (NSN)

# Submission to the Education Select Committee call for evidence

## The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

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. 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.

We have used this submission to highlight what we know from our network of schools in relation to these issues.

## The effect of cancelling formal exams

NSN welcomes the decision to cancel formal exams for GCSE and A level pupils. This has provided clarity for the sector, pupils and their parents/carers. However, we believe this decision urgently requires further clarification.

Many free schools are expecting to receive their first exam results this year, or have a limited track record, and have concerns regarding the awarding of grades. This includes results being driven down by Ofqual's statistical standardisation of centre assessment grades outlined in the decision outcomes of the public consultation.

A copy of a letter written to Ofqual by NSN's Director, Unity Howard, has been sent to the Chair of the Committee and [can be found on NSN's website](#). Key points include:

- At least 158 schools in our network do not have enough historical evidence, as determined by the method of calculation in Ofqual's consultation outcome.

- At least 21 free schools have no previous assessment data and from these schools, 100% that responded to our survey said that they were concerned or very concerned that their results would be negatively impacted by a perceived lack of track record.
- Of those free schools that have previously received exam results, over 60% do not have the full track record as stated in the consultation outcomes.

Disadvantaged students at free schools outperform their peers in other types of schools. Free schools are also the highest performing type of state school at GCSE and A level, despite their lack of historical performance. The decision to prioritise 'historical evidence of centre performance' over other methods pitches different types of schools against each other, issuing unfair outcomes for these children.

While Ofqual has acknowledged statistical standardisation will need to accommodate centres without historical results, NSN recommends such schools be allowed to see final details of the model adopted. This should be clearly set out as to how they will be accommodated to ensure the aims of being objective and fair are met. We believe this will prevent free schools from being unfairly disadvantaged owing to a lack of historical data. Decisions concerning the awarding of grades must be communicated clearly to schools, pupils and parents/carers.

Beyond the immediate challenges of schools closures, there are concerns for free schools sitting exams for the first time in 2021. These pupils will potentially have missed out on at least six months of learning owing to school closures. In some alternative provision (AP) free school settings, NSN has received reports of children missing months of learning that would require two years of stable education before an exam can be sat by pupils who have mental health issues. Pupils may not have had an opportunity to, for example, access learning resources from home or sit mock exams further widening the attainment gap. This is of particular concern among free schools that do not yet have full cohorts or are not part of large multi-academy trusts (MATs), that may not have the staffing capacity to both design and deliver remote learning while overseeing children of key workers who do attend school.

NSN welcomes the approach to home learning taken by the Department, in addition to there being no requirement on Ofsted to review or assess any part of this – but there is a danger that disadvantaged pupils will fall further behind without a minimum curriculum entitlement clearly established on a national level.

## Support for pupils and families during closures

Free schools and trusts have responded swiftly to school closures with innovative solutions to support home learning and provide community-level support. Examples include:

- To address challenges concerning adult digital literacy, XP Trust has set-up a parent support centre and created a series of YouTube videos that troubleshoot problems with online learning. The trust publishes a weekly overview of the lessons for children and access to online learning expeditions.
- Two years ago, New Bridge MAT provided all 800 students with a device to support learning, with lessons contextualised to pupil's needs. Due to a strong emphasis on parents supporting online learning from the beginning, continuity of learning has been assured.
- Reach Academy Feltham, Inspiration Trust and Dixons Academies Trust contributed significantly to the creation of the Oak National Academy, which delivered two million lessons in its first week.
- StarLine, led by Star Academies, is a helpline that provides expert advice six days a week on curriculum, wellbeing, SEND and home learning strategies. StarLive is a weekly YouTube series that looks at aspects of parenting, education and home learning.
- The Co-op Academies Trust has provided 1,000 devices across its schools to support online lessons.
- London Academy of Excellence Tottenham (LAET) has used its state-of-the-art design and technology facilities to produce over 1,000 protective face shields for frontline workers in North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust and other hospitals and GP surgeries across London. In addition to its PPE provision, LAET has worked with supporters at Highgate School and other partners to fundraise for a Coronavirus Support Fund, which provides financial support to pupils and local charities.
- Robin Hood MAT has created Learning Projects, a series of projects for parents to undertake with their children from early years through to Year 6 during school closures.
- ContinU Plus Academy has been proactive in addressing concerns over vulnerable pupils not in school, including daily calls and once per week for all others. They continue to carry out social distancing 'front door' visits and provide weekly food packages for pupils most in need.

Whilst it is clear that the sector has responded heroically, NSN is particularly concerned about the rising divide across the country, where pupils and parents have access to vastly different levels of education. This is unlikely to change when schools begin to re-open for more pupils. **We believe it is therefore important for the Government to lay out a national minimum entitlement for education at this time.**

Schools closures have brought digital poverty to the forefront of conversations on how best to continue learning at home and mitigate the inevitable widening of the disadvantage gap. Large multi-academy trusts responded swiftly to school closures such as the Academies Enterprise Trust

(AET), creating the AET Virtual Learning Academy. AET has set up 20,000 Google classrooms and purchased 9,000 Chromebooks to ensure all children eligible free school meals have access to digital learning at home.

However, schools in single academy trusts or small multi-academy trusts often do not have the finances or staffing required to deliver these initiatives. For example, a free school going from the first year of opening to the second year of opening will need to prioritise staff and student recruitment to remain viable in upcoming years. In AP settings, some free schools with high proportions of disadvantaged children have had to ration laptops as there are not enough to distribute widely. This has put teachers in an incredibly difficult position of prioritising pupils that are disadvantaged. NSN has heard from AP free schools having to make difficult decisions regarding the distribution of laptops due to fears of online grooming or devices being sold.

This uncovers a deeper chasm that exists, where well structured multi-academy trusts with capacity, expertise and financial resilience have been able to adapt more quickly to the impact of the pandemic. Single academy trusts and more isolated schools are therefore at a disadvantage. NSN believes that single academy trusts and free schools should be able to operate independently from a large multi-academy trust, but this should not have an impact on their pupils nor creating an unequal school system. We are carefully considering this divide in determining our thinking on the future of education reform in England.

Other issues that have arisen include parents' lack of digital skills to support their children's learning. The UK Consumer Digital Index 2019<sup>1</sup> highlights nearly half of offline people come from a low-income household. This raises concerns about online safety and safeguarding children, inequitable access to laptops in households with more than one child, and children not having adequate space to study at home – challenges that are likely to affect disadvantaged cohorts. To address these challenges, schools have been innovative in their provision for groups at risk of falling behind. For example, at New Bridge MAT, each pupil and member of staff have their own device to support learning. As a result, the transition to home learning was efficient and with support provided to parents/carers to assist in home learning, challenges in relation to adult digital literacy were also being addressed.

## The effect on disadvantaged groups

NSN welcomes plans for the phased re-opening of schools. However, we are very concerned that the most disadvantaged pupils may not take up these places when they are available. They are the

---

<sup>1</sup> [UK Consumer Digital Index 2019](#)

most likely group to lack adequate access to online learning, and the attainment gap is widening on a daily basis while they are not in school.

Free schools are helping disadvantaged pupils access high-quality education, being nearly three times more likely to be located in the most deprived areas of the country than the least deprived areas.

Consideration must be given to the impact of isolation on young people which may affect disadvantaged pupils to a greater extent. This is the result of multiple factors such as living in overcrowded housing, environments of domestic abuse, sexual abuse, county drug lines and gangs to name a few. There will be an urgent need for mental health support services to cater to an increase in demand from those with mental health concerns and pupils who may have been bereaved during the crisis. This will require a joined-up approach between the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care. Due consideration needs to be made to what role schools take in response to this; while schools are closest to their pupils, the mental health needs will require the expertise of mental health professionals, the structure and funding of this support must reflect that.

As schools undertake preparations to re-open in the summer term, concerns remain as to how this will be done safely. NSN has had discussions with special schools that will encounter challenges due to having a higher number of pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. As social distancing measures continue, and with that an increase in regular risk assessments, there are concerns that special schools with SEMH needs will face an uphill struggle. Risks that need to be addressed range from the logistics of getting pupils on site, to maintaining social distancing and increased hygiene practices with a possibility of not having a full workforce who may be shielding or themselves are high-risk.

What is clear from these examples is that school closures and the prospects of how schools re-open have a significant impact on disadvantaged pupils and the legacy of COVID-19 will be long felt after the pandemic dissipates. Whilst this is a new area to explore in England, some countries have experience in managing the impact of school closures as a result of previous epidemics. From West Africa re-opening schools after Ebola to the SARS epidemic in South East Asia, there is much we can learn from countries who have the experience to effectively address the long-term challenges that stem from school closures.

Education and improving the life chances of children in England is key to addressing the attainment gap. **As part of national recovery efforts and to ensure that social justice remains at the heart of this process, NSN strongly believes the free schools programme should be expanded to parts of the country that are yet to have a free school, targeting the most disadvantaged communities.**

## Other

Consideration must be given to Ofsted inspections and the impact this has on free schools that were due to receive their first inspection between March-July 2020, or receive their first inspection in the academic year 2020/21. The loss of a full term of normal operation will inevitably have a significant impact on the ability to prepare for a first Ofsted inspection. Given the current situation, the safety and wellbeing of pupils is the primary concern of schools and pastoral care will continue to take precedence for a considerable amount of time once schools re-open. **Inspections should be phased back in, at the very earliest, one full term after all settings re-open full time to all pupils, with a flexible approach to making judgements and an adapted common inspection framework.** The approach should be laid out clearly for schools, particularly as the Department for Education has confirmed a significant amount of assessment and performance data will not be published this year.

NSN is concerned at the disruption caused to the construction of new free schools due to open in September 2020, particularly as they will have been approved to provide much-needed capacity to the local area. **We believe new schools are critical to national infrastructure and must remain a key focus for the government throughout this pandemic.** Delays or cancellations to new free schools could be catastrophic, particularly in areas of high deprivation and for pupils on free school meals.

Schools in pre-opening that are now facing site delays also need greater guidance from the Department as to how best to manage communication with stakeholders. Marketing is a crucial priority for schools in this phase, but in some cases, schools have been told not to share any information about the status of their site externally. This has left schools unclear as to how to proceed with their marketing strategy and could leave them with unviable pupil numbers come September.

**NSN believes that construction of new schools should be a priority;** the speed with which NHS Nightingale hospitals have been set up demonstrate that construction of critical infrastructure can be completed quickly and to a high standard with sufficient resource. In the longer term, local authorities should be required to hold land for new schools to minimise delays in the site location process.

May 2020