Written evidence submitted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

1   Introduction

1. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) is the leading independent provider of education research and insights in the UK.

2. NFER has undertaken research into the impact of COVID-19 on education, which has been co-funded by The Nuffield Foundation.

3. The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice.

4. The first in a series of reports was published on 1 June, followed by a second report on 16th June. The findings from the third and fourth reports, due to be published on 26th June, are included in this submission. NFER will carry out a second wave of this study on the impact of COVID-19 on education during July, and the findings will be launched in September.

5. Data is also taken from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) PISA 2018 findings, which was carried out in England by NFER on behalf of the Department for Education.

6. This submission will focus on two key points from the Inquiry's Terms of Reference: disadvantaged groups and remote learning. The submission also includes other key findings from NFER's reports, to inform the Committee's broader understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on education.

2   Background

7. From 7 to 17 May 2020, NFER collected data via a survey sent to all 20,553 state-funded mainstream primary and secondary schools in England. We asked senior leaders (head teachers, principals and deputy head teachers) to complete the survey themselves and pass the survey on to up to two teachers of different key stages (primary schools), or up to four teachers of different subject areas (secondary schools). We received responses from 1233 senior leaders and 1821 teachers in 1462 primary schools (including middle deemed primary) and 691 secondary schools (including middle deemed secondary and all-through schools), representing nine per cent of the 17,170 primary schools and 20 per cent of the 3383 secondary schools in England. We weighted the data to ensure that our findings are representative of mainstream schools in England. Some schools provided more than the requested number of responses, which was also addressed by weighting the data.

8. The survey focused on four main areas: returning pupils to school; schools' provision of remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic and pupils' engagement; schools' provision for vulnerable pupils and children of keyworkers; and staff workload and

work satisfaction. The survey also asked respondents for some information about themselves, including their job role, time in teaching, gender and age.

9. The NFER team used DfE administrative data to identify the characteristics of each school, including: phase, proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), school type (local authority or academy), and region. Weighting used the distribution of the achieved sample relative to the national population of school phase and FSM quintile.

10. The analysis used three main approaches: descriptive statistics for all of the survey questions; tests of statistical significance to identify associations between selected questions and school characteristics; and regression models for pupil engagement with learning, engagement of disadvantaged pupils, work satisfaction, workload, and preparedness for opening schools more fully. Results were considered statistically significant if the probability of a result occurring by chance was less than five per cent ($p = < 0.05$).

11. In exploring the issues for different groups of children, NFER has used the government's definitions of 'disadvantage' (including all those eligible for the pupil premium in each of the last 6 years) and 'vulnerable groups' (those with an Education Health and Care Plan, a social worker, or identified as vulnerable by their local authority).

3   Recommendations

12. Based on analysis of the key findings from the reports, NFER can draw the following recommendations on the issues of disadvantaged groups and remote learning.

13. Given the challenges in engaging pupils in remote learning, it is important to get all children back to school as soon as it is safe to do so. However, this is critical for disadvantaged pupils, pupils in the most disadvantaged schools, vulnerable pupils and pupils with little or no access to IT and/or study space.

14. During this unprecedented and unplanned period of home learning, it will be critical to broaden access to digital devices to a wider range of disadvantaged pupils in order to avoid any accumulation in disengagement. Poor IT access is a particular challenge for disadvantaged pupils, and the area of most concern to teachers in terms of those who are least engaged in remote learning.

15. Given the impacts from the pandemic are likely to persist for some time, clearer guidelines on the role of schools and other agencies - in terms of the level of support that other agencies should be providing for vulnerable pupils - are needed to ensure their needs are appropriately met. Policy makers need to identify why and where this support is lacking; and ensure that resources are provided to schools and other agencies to guarantee that the needs of vulnerable pupils are addressed, alongside all the other pressures on schools.

16. Policy makers should consider the different challenges in supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils across different contexts. Challenges vary between primary and secondary schools in terms of engagement, learning support and welfare needs. Schools with higher levels of disadvantage will require more staff and resources in

order to support their pupils. It is essential that policy is targeted towards the challenges facing different schools and their pupils.

17. While the pandemic continues, it will be important for the Government, local authorities, academy trusts and schools themselves to ensure appropriate messaging and support to parents of disadvantaged pupils, given the extent to which senior leaders expected these parents to keep their children at home. As schools open to more pupils, there will still be groups of children who remain at home as a result of underlying health conditions for them or their families. An on-going focus on the quality of remote learning will be required for these groups, as well as others who continue to stay at home once schools open more fully.

18. Given the positive link between pupil engagement and schools' use of VLEs, it may be worthwhile to promote the benefits of these platforms to schools, to increase the number of schools using VLEs, and to support schools to implement them. Government, Trusts, LAs and senior leaders also need to ensure that teachers have access to sufficient training and equipment to enable them to deliver effective remote learning support and to use technology effectively.

19. Schools may also wish to consider the possibility of expanding their range of 'active' forms of teaching and learning, such as online conversations between teachers and pupils, which have a positive association with pupil engagement (though this needs to be balanced against the increased demands on staff).

20. Until children return to school and can be properly assessed by their teachers, it will be difficult to determine the amount of lost learning, and the extent to which gaps have widened between different groups of pupils. However, our research suggests that there will need to be extensive catch up activities for the large proportion of pupils – particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils – who have been less engaged with remote learning.

4 Disadvantaged and vulnerable groups

4.1 Returning pupils to school

21. School leaders reported that before most schools closed to the majority of pupils in March, the pandemic had the greatest impact on schools serving the most deprived pupils.

22. Leaders from schools with the highest proportion of FSM pupils were more likely to report that they had experienced a significant drop in numbers of pupils attending school before 20 March (73 per cent) than those with the lowest proportion of FSM pupils (56 per cent). This suggests that the differential impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged pupils dates back to the period before lockdown.

23. In May, senior leaders with the highest proportion of FSM pupils estimated that more of their children's families would keep them at home once schools opened more widely in June (50 per cent on average) compared with an average estimate of 42 per cent from leaders with the lowest proportion of FSM pupils.

24. This raises concerns that pupils in most need of access to education will be least likely to receive it, which risks increasing the attainment gap between those who are eligible for free school meals and those who are not.

25. It is likely that the pandemic has served to widen existing disadvantage gaps, especially for those at greater risk of being affected by their own or their family's self-isolation and/or exposure to the virus.

4.2 Engagement

26. Lack of engagement and parental support are the most important challenges that senior leaders and teachers were facing in supporting vulnerable pupils. Not only is in-school attendance for vulnerable pupils low, but many vulnerable pupils were not engaging in remote provision. Most teachers also reported that engagement for vulnerable pupils is lower than their classmates.

27. Vulnerable pupils in the most deprived schools were less likely to engage in remote learning and were more difficult to keep in touch with, relative to other children.

28. Vulnerable pupil engagement is particularly low in secondary schools. Senior leaders in secondary schools are one and a half times more likely to report that lack of pupil engagement in learning is a challenge.

29. For the wider group of disadvantaged pupils, levels of engagement were also lower than their classmates, with schools concerned that their parents were less likely to be able to support them with their school work and that they had poorer access to IT. Children in the most deprived schools were also less likely to have contact from their teachers, and more limited coverage of the curriculum.

4.3 In-school provision

30. Many vulnerable pupils attending schools onsite were receiving similar, if not better, learning provision than children at home.

31. Nearly half (46 per cent) of secondary senior leaders reported that their main approach to supporting the learning of vulnerable pupils and the children of keyworkers was teaching them the same curriculum content that they were sending to pupils learning remotely. Therefore these pupils were not at a disadvantage and may have had an advantage (due to being supported by qualified teachers and teaching assistants), relative to their peers at home.

32. Over a quarter (29 per cent) of primary senior leaders reported that their school's main approach for pupils attending onsite was providing non-curriculum based activities such as games or crafts. These vulnerable pupils and the children of keyworkers could be at a disadvantage relative to their peers learning at home.

33. While 58 per cent of senior leaders in the least deprived schools were teaching the same curriculum content as was being sent to children learning at home, this was only the case for 35 per cent of senior leaders in the most deprived schools.

34. Over a third (37 per cent) of leaders in the most deprived schools reported that their main approach was providing extra-curricular activities, compared to 17 per cent in schools with the lowest levels of deprivation.

4.4   Remote provision for vulnerable pupils

35. The majority of schools were using printed resources and worksheets to support vulnerable pupils who are learning at home. In particular, remote provision for vulnerable pupils was less IT-focused in more deprived schools and in primary schools.

36. Senior leaders in the most deprived schools were less likely to provide laptops for their pupils and more likely to be relying on printed resources. Similarly, the proportion of senior leaders in primary schools providing IT equipment (33 per cent) is less than half that in secondary schools.

4.5   Welfare support for vulnerable pupils

37. Three-quarters of senior leaders reported that their schools were offering 'social or welfare' support to vulnerable pupils, often by working with other agencies.

38. Many schools were supporting their pupils by providing food vouchers and parcels (95 per cent), home visits (39 per cent), and providing non-education related information (83 per cent) to assist families.

39. As schools open more fully and there are more pressures on the school workforce, the current levels of welfare support may become unsustainable.

40. Over half (54 per cent) of senior leaders in the most deprived schools reported significant concerns for the safety and well-being of vulnerable pupils, relative to 35 per cent of senior leaders in the least deprived schools.

41. The share of senior leaders reporting that their school was carrying out home visits ranged from 26 per cent in the most affluent schools to 46 per cent in the most deprived schools.

42. Almost all of the most deprived schools (99 per cent) were supporting their vulnerable pupils with food vouchers or parcels.

5   Remote learning for all pupils

5.1   Pupil engagement

43. Primary school leaders said that 71 per cent of pupils were getting involved in learning activities, while school leaders in secondary schools indicated that an average of 63 per cent of pupils were getting involved in set work.

44. School leaders believed that around one third of pupils (29-37 per cent) were not engaging with set work at all.

45. We also looked at the extent to which children were engaged by asking teachers what percentage had returned their last piece of set work. Teachers in the most deprived schools reported 30 per cent of pupils returned their last piece of work, compared to 49 per cent of pupils in the least deprived schools.

46. Schools with the highest levels of pupil deprivation (those in the highest free school meal quintile) reported 13 percentage point lower levels of pupil engagement compared to schools in the middle quintile.

47. Teachers reported that the following proportions of pupils were less engaged in remote learning than their classmates:

- Pupils with limited access to IT and/or study space (81 per cent)

- Vulnerable pupils (62 per cent)

- Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (58 per cent)

- Pupils eligible for Pupil Premium funding (52 per cent)

- Young carers (48 per cent).

48. The majority of teachers (90 per cent) believed that their pupils were doing less work than they would usually expect at this time of year.

5.2 Parental engagement

49. Teachers reported that, on average, just over half (55 per cent) of their pupils' parents were engaged with their children's home learning.

50. Teachers from the most deprived schools reported that parental engagement was significantly lower than teachers in the least deprived schools (41 per cent compared to 62 per cent).

5.3 Access to IT

51. School leaders reported that 23 per cent of their school's pupils have little or no access to IT at home. 'Little or no access' was defined as being due to one or more of the following issues: poor broadband access; little or no IT equipment in the home; and/or having to share equipment with other family members. Teachers reported this figure to be 27 per cent.

52. Most (93 per cent) of school leaders from the most deprived schools said they had some pupils with limited access to IT at home compared with 73 per cent of school leaders from the least deprived schools.

5.4 Virtual learning

53. Schools delivering learning content to pupils through online conversations (as part of a range of measures), had higher general pupil engagement levels (by five percentage points) and an increased probability of having highly engaged disadvantaged pupils (eight percentage points).

54. Schools using a virtual learning environment (VLE) to inform pupils about learning activities had an eight percentage points higher general pupil engagement level than schools not using VLEs.

55. Schools using a VLE also had a 13 percentage points increase in the probability of having highly engaged disadvantaged pupils.

56. Schools using telephone or video calls to inform pupils about learning activities reported three percentage point higher levels of pupil engagement, relative to schools that did not use these methods.

57. Teachers who set activities that involved consolidating previous learning or revising had a five percentage point higher level of engagement. These types of learning

activity also increased the likelihood of disadvantaged pupils being highly engaged by six percentage points.

5.5   Readiness to provide online learning

58. The majority of teachers (between 66 and 75 per cent) rated their ability to offer remote learning support to pupils as 'good or very good' for most of the aspects included in the survey.

59. Yet 80 per cent of teachers reported that all or certain areas of the curriculum are currently getting less attention than usual, across many subject areas, including all core curriculum subjects.

60. Teachers aged between 20 and 29 were likely to have lower pupil engagement and a lower likelihood of their disadvantaged pupils being highly engaged.

61. Teachers who felt well-supported by their school and teachers who teach Key Stage 5 were likely to have higher levels of pupil engagement, while teachers with a good quality working environment at home had a seven percentage point increase in the likelihood of their disadvantaged pupils being highly engaged.

62. Analysis of the PISA 2018 results showed that in the UK, approximately 66 per cent of school leaders agreed that their schools had an effective online learning support platform available. Just over 40 per cent of leaders in disadvantaged schools agreed with this compared to over 70 per cent of leaders in more advantaged schools.

6   Return of pupils to school sites

6.1   Practical issues

63. Only 18 per cent of primary school leaders thought it was very/entirely feasible to open their schools more fully from June 2020.

64. A majority (65 per cent) of primary leaders thought it would be at least somewhat feasible to operate a rota with different year groups or classes in school on different days. This suggests that primary leaders were willing to adopt the option explored by SAGE (2020) for schools to split classes and rotate attendance every one or two weeks.

65. School leaders wanted the Government to explain the scientific principles underpinning advice on opening schools more fully and to provide detailed advice about the relative safety of different activities.

66. Senior leaders identified a need for financial help to ensure good hygiene, especially hand sanitising and handwashing.

6.2   Staffing

67. School leaders have fewer teaching staff available at a time when they need more. Senior leaders explained that they will need extra staff to teach and supervise pupils while on site, provide remote learning for pupils at home and/or cover for absent staff and they need additional funding to pay for this.

6.3   Differences in schools by region

68. School leaders were more likely to report an impact from Covid-19 on their schools prior to 20 March if they are based in the West Midlands (82 per cent), London (82 per cent) and the North West (79 per cent) compared with school leaders based in the East Midlands (61 per cent).

69. School leaders were more likely to report that they experienced a significant drop in the number of pupils attending school before 20 March if they were based in London (72 per cent) and the West Midlands (70 per cent).

7   Job satisfaction

7.1   Working hours

70. On average, senior leaders and teachers who responded to our survey were working fewer hours during lockdown than they did in a typical week in February 2020.

71. Senior leaders reported working a mean average of 52.4 hours in a 'typical week' in February 2020, compared to 47.8 hours in the last full week that they worked since the lockdown on 20 March 2020.

72. The majority (71 per cent) of senior leaders were still working more than 40 hours per week, and 41 per cent are working more than 50 hours per week.

73. Forty-three per cent of senior leaders said the hours they were working (in May) were 'mostly/completely manageable', while 33 per cent say they were 'somewhat manageable'. In contrast, 24 per cent considered their workload 'mostly/completely unmanageable'.

74. Sixty-two per cent of teachers said they were 'mostly/completely manageable' and 24 per cent saying they were 'somewhat manageable'. Fourteen per cent said their working hours were 'mostly/completely unmanageable'.

7.2   Satisfaction

75. Most senior leaders and teachers were at least somewhat satisfied with their jobs, although a greater proportion of senior leaders are dissatisfied than teachers. The findings show that 36 per cent of senior leaders and 39 per cent of teachers were 'satisfied/completely satisfied' with their jobs in May 2020. By contrast, 31 per cent of senior leaders and 22 per cent of teachers said they were 'not satisfied/not at all satisfied' with their jobs.

76. There was a significant association between job satisfaction and feelings of being in control of different aspects of teaching and learning practice. Senior leaders and teachers who reported they feel more in control of their work, despite the disruptive effects of Covid-19, are also more likely to have higher job satisfaction.

7.3   Sources of pressure

77. For senior leaders responding to the survey in May, the three main sources of pressure impacting on them 'to a large/very large extent' are: 'concerns about

opening the school more fully in future' (86 per cent), the 'health and well-being of my staff' (76 per cent), and 'directives from government' (67 per cent).

78. The main pressures felt by teachers 'to a large/very large extent' are: 'being responsible for estimating pupils' examination grades' (36 per cent of secondary teachers), 'parenting my own young children' (25 per cent of all teachers), and 'difficulties supporting pupils' remote learning' (23 per cent of all teachers).

7.4 Sources of support

79. Most senior leaders were accessing support from 'local authority services' (88 per cent), 'my professional association' (83 per cent), and 'senior leaders from other schools' (77 per cent). Most teachers are accessing support from 'my colleagues/ peers' (97 per cent), 'senior leaders from my school' (94 per cent), and 'my union' (57 per cent).

80. Senior leaders were getting good support from their colleagues in other schools. Of those who have received support from multi-academy trust (MAT) senior leaders, most found this 'very/extremely helpful' (61 per cent). Similarly, of those who have received support from senior leaders from other schools, 60 per cent found this 'very/extremely helpful'. On the other hand, the least helpful source accessed by senior leaders is 'local authority (LA) services'. While 26 per cent of senior leaders found this support 'very/extremely helpful', a substantial minority (30 per cent) found it 'not very/not at all helpful'.

81. The single most helpful type of support accessed by teachers was 'my colleagues/peers', with 73 per cent of those receiving it finding this 'very/extremely helpful'.

82. Support from senior leaders was a significant driver of teachers' job satisfaction. Teachers were more likely to feel satisfied in their jobs if they felt supported by their senior leaders and local networks, and felt they had control over teaching and learning methods.

8 Full reports

83. The links to the full reports are as follows:

84. Returning pupils to school https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4060/schools_responses_to_covid_19_early_report_final.pdf

85. Pupil engagement in remote learning https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4073/schools_responses_to_covid_19_pupil_engagement_in_remote_learning.pdf

86. Support for vulnerable pupils and the children of keyworkers http://www.nfer.ac.uk/schools-responses-to-covid-19-support-for-vulnerable-pupils-and-the-children-of-keyworkers/