



BRIEFING PAPER

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Coronavirus and schools: FAQs

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Summary

Coverage of this briefing

This briefing paper looks at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools and pupils. It largely focuses on England. It provides information on the January 2021 school restrictions (for most children), attendance rates in the autumn 2020 term, and remote education. Secondary exams including GCSEs, A Levels and equivalents are covered in a separate briefing paper, [Coronavirus: exams in 2021](#).

This is a fast-moving issue and this briefing should be read as correct at the time of publication.

Timeline of main Government announcements on schooling from January 2021 (England)

30 December 2020: further delay announced to return to face-to-face teaching for most secondary pupils in England. Most primary pupils to return to school at start of term as planned, except for some areas of London and the South East.

1 January 2021: Additional London boroughs were added to the primary closure (for most pupils) list.

4 January 2021: Announcement that mainstream primary and secondary schools, and colleges, will move to remote learning for most pupils from the following day, and confirmation that it would not be “possible or fair for all exams to go ahead this summer as normal”.

Impact on education, development and wellbeing

Survey evidence indicates wide disparities in young people’s home learning experiences during school closures and periods of self-isolation; there have been particular concerns about the impacts on disadvantaged children. The DfE is commissioning an expert group to monitor differential impacts of the pandemic.

School funding and additional costs relating to the pandemic

The Department for Education (DfE) has made some additional funding available for free school meals, exceptional cleaning costs, catch-up funding and tutoring, laptops and digital devices, and supply staff costs. However, concerns remain that some schools will struggle to meet pandemic-related costs.

1. Background on school closures and re-openings

1.1 School closures & reopening for the autumn 2020 term

Schools in all parts of the UK were closed to most children by the start of the week commencing Monday 23 March 2020. In England, some schools remained open where necessary for the children of critical workers, and vulnerable children including: those with a social worker; Looked-after children; and those with an education, health and care (EHC) plan because they have complex special educational needs.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also put similar arrangements in place for the children of critical workers, and vulnerable pupils. In England, some other pupils in a limited number of priority year groups were encouraged to return later in the summer term. Information on attendance rates in England during this period can be found in the annexe to this briefing paper.

Schools remained closed to most pupils until the beginning of the autumn 2020 term – September in England and Wales, and August in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Schools in all four nations opened with the expectation of full attendance for the new 2020/21 school year.

1.2 4 January 2021: mainstream schools in England close to most pupils until after February half term 2021

During his [address to the nation](#) on 4 January 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that primary schools, secondary schools, and colleges in England would move to remote learning for most pupils, until after February half-term, subject to review. Vulnerable pupils and critical workers' children could continue to attend face-to-face provision, and the DfE subsequently indicated that special schools and alternative provision would remain open.¹ Mr Johnson also said that the Government recognised that it was “not possible or fair for all exams to go ahead this summer as normal”.²

It was subsequently reported in the press that vocational/ technical exams (such as BTECs) planned for the next few weeks would still go ahead.³

The DfE published [updated guidance](#) on accessing school places on 5 January 2021.⁴

¹ [Department for Education Twitter post](#), 4 January 2021.

² [Prime Minister's address to the nation: 4 January 2021](#)

³ See e.g., [‘BTEC and other vocational exams to go ahead this week despite national lockdown. DfE confirms’](#), in *Schools Week*, 4 January 2021.

⁴ Department for Education, [‘Children of critical workers and vulnerable children who can access schools or educational settings’](#), 5 January 2021.

Vulnerable pupils (England)

Vulnerable children are defined in the 5 January guidance as those who:

- are assessed as being in need under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, including children and young people who have a child in need plan, a child protection plan or who are a looked-after child
- have an education, health and care (EHC) plan
- have been identified as otherwise vulnerable by educational providers or local authorities (including children's social care services), and who could therefore benefit from continued full-time attendance, this might include:
 - children and young people on the edge of receiving support from children's social care services or in the process of being referred to children's services
- adopted children or children on a special guardianship order
- those at risk of becoming NEET ('not in employment, education or training')
- those living in temporary accommodation
- those who are young carers
- those who may have difficulty engaging with remote education at home (for example due to a lack of devices or quiet space to study)
- care leavers
- others at the provider and local authority's discretion including pupils and students who need to attend to receive support or manage risks to their mental health.⁵

Critical workers or key workers (England)

The 5 January DfE guidance defines critical workers as follows:

Parents whose work is critical to the coronavirus (COVID-19) and EU transition response include those who work in health and social care and in other key sectors outlined in the following sections. Children with at least one parent or carer who is a critical worker can go to school or college if required.

Health and social care

This includes, but is not limited to, doctors, nurses, midwives, paramedics, social workers, care workers, and other frontline health and social care staff including volunteers; the support and specialist staff required to maintain the UK's health and social care sector; those working as part of the health and social care supply chain, including producers and distributors of medicines and medical and personal protective equipment.

Education and childcare

This includes:

childcare

support and teaching staff

⁵ Department for Education, '[Children of critical workers and vulnerable children who can access schools or educational settings](#)', 5 January 2021.

social workers

specialist education professionals who must remain active during the coronavirus (COVID-19) response to deliver this approach

Key public services

This includes:

those essential to the running of the justice system

religious staff

charities and workers delivering key frontline services

those responsible for the management of the deceased

journalists and broadcasters who are providing public service broadcasting

Local and national government

This only includes those administrative occupations essential to the effective delivery of:

the coronavirus (COVID-19) response, and the delivery of and response to EU transition

essential public services, such as the payment of benefits and the certification or checking of goods for import and export (including animal products, animals, plants and food), including in government agencies and arms length bodies

Food and other necessary goods

This includes those involved in food:

production

processing

distribution

sale and delivery

as well as those essential to the provision of other key goods (for example hygienic and veterinary medicines)

Public safety and national security

This includes:

police and support staff

Ministry of Defence civilians

contractor and armed forces personnel (those critical to the delivery of key defence and national security outputs and essential to the response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak and EU transition)

fire and rescue service employees (including support staff)

National Crime Agency staff

those maintaining border security, prison and probation staff and other national security roles, including those overseas

Transport and border

This includes those who will keep the air, water, road and rail passenger and freight transport modes operating during the coronavirus (COVID-19) response and EU transition, including those working on transport systems through which supply chains pass and those constructing or supporting the operation of critical

transport and border infrastructure through which supply chains pass.

Utilities, communication and financial services

This includes:

staff needed for essential financial services provision (including but not limited to workers in banks, building societies and financial market infrastructure)

the oil, gas, electricity and water sectors (including sewerage)

information technology and data infrastructure sector and primary industry supplies to continue during the coronavirus (COVID-19) response

key staff working in the civil nuclear, chemicals, telecommunications (including but not limited to network operations, field engineering, call centre staff, IT and data infrastructure, 999 and 111 critical services)

postal services and delivery

payments providers

waste disposal sectors.⁶

Reaction to 4 January announcements on schools in England

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) [described](#) the decision to restrict access to schools as one that had “been inevitable for some time”. It brought “some much needed clarity to the situation but it is a decision that should have been taken much sooner”. The union’s calls included:

- Urgent preparations for an orderly return to schooling, saying that there was a strong case for prioritising the vaccination of school staff alongside other key workers.
- An urgent review of the Government’s approach to special schools, alternative provision, nursery schools, and early years providers.
- For the Government to properly support home learning and “[deliver] on the promises of technology and learning resources”.

For a “robust set of arrangements” on awarding in light of cancelled.⁷

The National Education Union (NEU) [strongly criticised](#) the Government, saying:

No one wanted schools and colleges to be shut again but the evidence clearly pointed to the necessity for this to happen weeks ago. Why Boris Johnson allowed such confusion and chaos to build up around school openings before making this belated, blindingly obvious decision is beyond belief. Government must take responsibility for this closure because it has allowed COVID-19 to become, again, out of control.

⁶ Department for Education, ‘[Children of critical workers and vulnerable children who can access schools or educational settings](#)’, 5 January 2021

⁷ National Association of Head Teachers press release, ‘[Prioritising education means prioritising safety in schools and vaccinations for staff](#)’, says NAHT’, 4 January 2021.

Among other things, the union called for “much more” to be done for vulnerable pupils, and for the Government to fulfil what it described as “a long-broken promise to provide laptops and internet access for all pupils so that they are able to access remote learning at home”.⁸

The NASUWT said that a national lockdown was the “only credible response” to the situation, and that it was right that the Government had accepted calls for a move to online education. However, it criticised the Government for “not yet signall[ing] rolling out the vaccine to prioritise schools and education staff”, and said it was essential to work with the sector on alternative plans for exam awarding so as not to “repeat the mistakes of last summer”.⁹

Children’s Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, [said that](#) the decision to close schools to most children “was not something to celebrate or welcome”, and that it would cause more harm to children the longer it went on.

She drew particular attention to socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable children, noting that the attendance rates of children with a social worker or who were otherwise vulnerable, and those with EHC plans, remained low during the school closures in the 2019-20 academic year. She called for:

- The closure period to be as short as possible, with schools re-opened ahead of other sectors – particularly, primary schools.
- The publication of a clear forward plan for how education will be delivered over the next three months, and specific requirements around direct online contact with teachers.
- Government to ensure appropriate technology was available, and for any children unable to access this, to be allowed to attend school from the week commencing 11 January 2021.
- Teachers and other staff working with children to be prioritised for vaccination, alongside health and social care staff.¹⁰

January 2021 school term in other parts of UK

Before Christmas, the Scottish Government announced that schools would not offer on-site provision to most pupils until at least 18 January 2021. Schools would be open to vulnerable and key worker children from the beginning of term, and would provide online learning for other pupils from 11 January.¹¹

On Monday 4 January 2021, whilst outlining further lockdown measures for Scotland, First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said that

⁸ National Education Union, [‘National Lockdown: Schools and colleges to close’](#), 4 January 2021.

⁹ NASUWT, [‘NASUWT responds to the Prime Minister’s announcement of the latest lockdown’](#), 4 January 2021.

¹⁰ Children’s Commissioner for England, [‘Lockdown school closures mean we need to act now to save children’s education and wellbeing’](#), 5 January 2021.

¹¹ Statement by First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, [‘COVID-19 update: First Minister’s Speech’](#), 19 December 2020.

Scotland's schools would stay closed to most pupils until 1 February 2021, with a review on 18 January. The change would apply to all pupils, except vulnerable children, and children of key workers, and to "nursery schools, as well as primary and secondary schools". These school measures would also apply across Scotland, and not just to Scotland's Level 4 (mainland) areas.¹²

The Welsh Government announced on 4 January 2021 that schools would remain closed to most pupils until 18 January 2021.¹³ Until then, the intention had been to have a staggered start to the new term, with plans varying by local authority area.¹⁴

In Northern Ireland, BBC news reported on 4 January 2021 that most primary and secondary school pupils would now not return to face-to-face provision for an extended period.¹⁵ Additionally, transfer tests (for admission to Northern Ireland's selective grammar schools) would not go ahead.¹⁶ Originally, primary school pupils were to be taught remotely for the first week of term, so until the week commencing 11 January 2021 and after this, were expected to attend on site. Post-primary (secondary) pupils in years 8 to 11 were to be taught remotely from the beginning of term until the end of January, with those in years 12 to 14 attending in person from 11 January.¹⁷

1.3 What happened prior to the announcements on 4 January 2021? (England)

Primary and secondary schools

Earlier in December 2020, the Government had said it intended all primary pupils to return as normal in January 2021, and for secondary non-exam year groups to have one week of online schooling before returning to onsite provision from 11 January 2021.

However, on 30 December 2020, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announced a further delay to the return to onsite learning for most secondary pupils across England.¹⁸ Most secondary year groups would not return to face-to-face teaching until the week commencing 18 January, subject to review, regardless of tier. However, exam year pupils

¹² Statement by First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, '[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) update: First Minister's statement - Monday 4 January 2021](#)', 4 January 2021.

¹³ Cabinet Statement, '[Written Statement: Return to school and college arrangements](#)', 4 January 2021.

¹⁴ Cabinet Statement, '[Written Statement: Secondary schools and colleges in Wales will move to online learning from Monday 14 December 2020 as part of the national effort to reduce coronavirus transmission](#)', 10 December 2020.

¹⁵ '[Coronavirus: Extended period of remote learning for NI schools](#)', *BBC News*, 4 January 2021.

¹⁶ '[Covid-19: Post-primary transfer tests cancelled in Northern Ireland](#)', *BBC News*, 5 January 2021.

¹⁷ Department of Education, '[Weir announces changes to schools' reopening arrangements](#)', 31 December 2020.

¹⁸ Education Secretary Gavin Williamson Statement to Parliament, '[Education Secretary sets out school contingency plans for England](#)', 30 December 2020

would return from 11 January, and vulnerable and critical worker pupils from the start of term.

The Government's position as stated in late December 2020 was that most primary schools would open at the beginning of the January term, as planned. However, on 30 December 2020, Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, announced changes for primaries in some areas of the South East and London "where the infection rates are highest".¹⁹ In these areas, the starting date was to be delayed to the week commencing 18 January for most children, excluding vulnerable and critical worker children, subject to review. All other children would be provided with remote education. These areas would be subject to the DfE's [contingency framework](#), which sets out additional restrictions for education providers (excluding universities).

On 1 January 2021, following representations by teaching and leadership unions, some London councils excluded from the original closure list, and the Mayor of London, the Government [announced](#) that all London boroughs would be subject to the delayed return arrangements for primary schools.²⁰

In response to the question of how the original areas of London and the South East were selected, a DfE blog article of 31 December 2020 said:

We work closely with PHE, the NHS, with DHSC and across government to monitor the number of new infections, positivity rates, and pressures on the NHS. The contingency framework has been applied to address local areas with high rates of infection and with significant increases in 7-day case rates, and pressure on the NHS.²¹

Position of teaching and leadership unions

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) announced on 2 January 2021 that they had jointly commenced "preliminary steps in legal proceedings" against the Department for Education, together with the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). The NAHT said:

The legal process we have instigated covers a wide range of issues from the scientific advice the government is drawing on, right through to the proposed arrangements for covid testing in schools.

Alongside this, the NAHT called for the Government to revisit its list of 'high risk' areas – i.e., those where primary schools' physical re-opening was being delayed.²² It also advocated an urgent review of the approach to special schools, alternative provision, and maintained nursery schools.

On Saturday 2 January 2021, the National Education Union (NEU) [advised primary and special school, and early years members](#) that it was

¹⁹ Education Secretary Gavin Williamson Statement to Parliament, '[Education Secretary sets out school contingency plans for England](#)', 30 December 2020.

²⁰ Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, '[Contingency framework implemented across London boroughs](#)', 1 January 2021.

²¹ Department for Education, '[Delayed return to school and contingency framework: Your questions answered](#)', 31 December 2020

²² National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), '[Update sent to members regarding start of term](#)', 2 January 2021.

“unsafe” for them to return to work. It has also previously urged a move to remote education for the first two weeks of January.²³ The NEU encouraged members to send [a letter](#) to employers on the issue of safety, declaring that they are “exercising [their] contractual right not to attend an unsafe place of work”.²⁴ The template letter cited sections of the *Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974*, as amended, and related secondary legislation. ‘Section 44’, in the template letter title was a reference to [section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996](#), which protects employees from suffering a detriment if they refuse to attend the workplace because they reasonably believe that there is a serious and imminent danger to themselves or to others. For more information on the 1996 Act, see Section 3 of our briefing paper, [Coronavirus: Returning to work](#).

The GMB Union expressed concern about the planned return to the classroom for primary schools and early years in most areas, and said it would continue to support “those local authorities who have taken the decision to close schools to children (other than for key workers or vulnerable groups) against the Secretary of State’s position”. However, on the issue of Section 44 template letters, it said:

GMB will not run the risk of our members being disciplined or dismissed from their employment for not attending work without an authorised reason such as sickness or holiday. You may have been advised that other Unions are suggesting that Section 44 of the 1996 Employment Rights Act Model letter gives members the right to leave their workplace in the face of a serious and imminent risk of danger but whilst this legislation may give protection against any action being taken by employers, the reality is what Section 44 means hasn’t been tested in the context of Covid –19.²⁵

Prime Minister urges pupils to attend school

On Sunday 3 January 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the Andrew Marr show that parents of primary-aged children in areas where schools are open should “absolutely” send their children to school at the start of the new term. He said there was “no doubt” in his mind that schools were safe. He also referred to the action previously taken, saying that “if you think about the history of the pandemic, we’ve kept schools going for a long, long time in areas where the pandemic has really been at really high levels.”²⁶

On 4 January 2021, the main education workforce unions issued a [joint statement](#), calling for a pause in the re-opening of schools for anyone other than vulnerable and critical worker children.²⁷

²³ National Education Union, ‘[NEU advises primary members it is unsafe to return to work](#)’, 2 January 2021.

²⁴ National Education Union, ‘[Section 44 letter download](#)’, accessed 3 January 2021.

²⁵ GMB Union, ‘[GMB Guidance: Re-opening of Primary Schools & Early Years \(England\)](#)’, 3 January 2021.

²⁶ BBC News online, ‘[Primary schools: Send children to school on Monday, says PM](#)’, 3 January 2021.

²⁷ National Association of Head Teachers, ‘[Education unions’ joint statement on the safe reopening of schools](#)’, 4 January 2021.

What happened before Christmas in England?

On 14 December 2020, the DfE's 'Education in the media' blog published a response to "a small minority of councils suggesting they would move to close schools early for the Christmas break", owing to concerns about infection. This said:

It remains our expectation that all schools should stay open. We will continue to work with local authorities to support them with any operational issues.

School is the best place for children and that is why we are keeping them open until the end of term, with remote learning only if a pupil has to do so in order to follow clinical or public health advice. Closing schools early risks putting many pupils at a disadvantage, none more so than GCSE and A level students preparing to take exams.

Current [guidance](#) from the department states schools should only be closed as a last resort and both the Prime Minister and Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson have said that education remains a national priority.

SAGE (the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) were explicit in their recommendation that schools should stay open with documents [published](#) in November highlighting that school closures put educational outcomes at risk, especially for disadvantaged students.

Recently, the [ONS](#) COVID-19 Infection Survey published results between 2 September (the start of the school year) to 16 October 2020²⁸ showed no evidence of differences in the positivity rate between primary and secondary school teachers, other key workers and other professions.

Additional [analysis](#) published on the 26 November showed no clear evidence from the survey as to whether there was a difference in the level of individuals who would test positive for COVID-19 between teachers and other key workers.

A DfE spokesperson said:

It is a national priority to keep education settings open full time and it is vital that children remain in school until the end of the term.

Schools, colleges and early years settings across the country have worked tremendously hard to put protective measures in place that are helping reduce the risk of the virus being transmitted and our regional school commissioner teams continue to support local authorities and school trusts to remain open and help resolve any operational issues.²⁸

Direction to Royal Borough of Greenwich

On 14 December 2020, the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, issued a [temporary continuity direction](#) to the Royal Borough of Greenwich (RBG), exercising powers in the *Coronavirus Act 2020*. On Sunday 13 December, RBG had written to head teachers to ask them to close their premises for face-to-face provision for most pupils, from Tuesday 15 December. Williamson's direction required RBG to withdraw the letters it sent to head teachers, parents, carers and

²⁸ Department for Education, '[Schools to remain open until the end of term](#)', 14 December 2020.

families, and send a 'Schools Opening Requirement' letter to head teachers.

On 15 December 2020, RBG published [a notice](#) about its response to the direction. Council leader, Danny Thorpe, stated:

I cannot agree that this is the correct choice for our schools. However, I also cannot justify the use of public funds to fight the decision in the courts. Consequently, I have no choice but to ask our schools to keep their doors open to all students rather than just continuing with online learning.²⁹

RBG also [published](#) a further letter to parents, and one to Mr. Williamson.

Plans for testing of school students and staff

At the time of writing, it isn't clear what the full implications of the January 4 school restrictions will be, on the previously-announced plans for in-school testing of pupils and staff in England. The section below outlines Government plans as they stood prior to 5 January 2021.

On 15 December 2020, the DfE and DHSC confirmed that all secondary and special schools, and alternative education providers, would have access to rapid testing for pupils and school staff, from January 2021. The [press release](#) said:

- All staff in secondary schools and colleges would be eligible for weekly rapid testing.
- Secondary students would be able to have access to rapid testing for seven days, where they are identified as close contacts of someone who has tested positive.
- If they took up the offer of rapid testing, they would no longer be required to isolate unless they start displaying symptoms, or test positive.

Primary schools would also be supported to roll out testing "as quickly as possible" over the spring term.³⁰

On 29 December 2020, the Government announced that 1,500 military personnel would support the testing programme:

The majority of personnel will form local response teams, providing support and phone advice to institutions needing guidance on the testing process and set-up of the testing facilities.

This will be done predominantly through webinars and individual meetings, but teams will also be on standby to deploy at short notice to provide in-person support to resolve any issues in the situations where testing would otherwise not be able to go ahead. Schools and colleges will shortly be provided with further information on how to request additional support if needed.³¹

²⁹ Royal Borough of Greenwich, ['Response to the Government regarding schools'](#), 15 December 2020.

³⁰ Department for Education/ Department of Health and Social Care press release, ['Secondary schools and colleges to get weekly coronavirus testing'](#), 15 December 2020.

³¹ Ministry of Defence and Department for Education news story, ['Military to support the testing of thousands of secondary school and college students in England'](#), 29 December 2020.

NHS Test and Trace has published [a guide for schools on colleges](#) on implementing mass asymptomatic testing.³²

Also in December, Mr Williamson announced that secondary pupils would be able to have two lateral flow (rapid) tests at the beginning of the January 2021 term.³³

A DfE blog article published on 30 December 2020 suggested that the department expected all schools to participate in asymptomatic testing, where offered. The guidance published by NHS Test and Trace makes clear that testing of *individual students and school staff* would be voluntary:

Participation is voluntary for the programme and active consent is required either by staff, pupils or students or parents/legal guardians, as appropriate. However, if any staff member, student or pupil does not wish to consent to take part in testing they will still be able to attend school or college unless they develop symptoms.

People who decline to participate in serial contact testing will follow the usual national guidelines and are legally obliged to self-isolate according to the advice given to them by the NHS Test & Trace service.³⁴

Remote education requirements for schools in England

The Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, has issued a [temporary continuity direction](#) under the *Coronavirus Act 2020*, as amended. This concerns remote education where pupils are unable to attend school for reasons connected to the pandemic. The direction applies to schools and other settings in England that educate state-funded pupils of (and in some cases, below) compulsory school age.

An [explanatory note](#) to the direction clarifies that:

Qualifying schools and settings are expected to provide immediate remote education where a pupil or group of pupils cannot attend for specified reasons.

The direction came into force on 22 October 2020.

1.4 Infection rates in the autumn 2020 term (England)

The round 7 updated report from Imperial College's Department of Health and Social Care-commissioned REACT-1 study for England was published on 15 December 2020. This relates to swabs collected between 13 November and 3 December 2020 inclusive. The report's authors concluded that between the previous round and round 7 (during the November national lockdown in England) "there was a fall in prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 swab-positivity nationally, but it did not

³² NHS Test and Trace, '[COVID 19 National Testing Programme, Schools and Colleges Handbook](#)', 23 December 2020.

³³ Department for Education, '[Staggered rollout of coronavirus testing for secondary schools and colleges](#)', 17 December 2020.

³⁴ NHS Test and Trace, '[COVID 19 National Testing Programme, Schools and Colleges Handbook](#)', 23 December 2020, p15.

fall uniformly over time or by geography.” During round 7, the highest prevalence was in school-aged children, “especially at ages 13-17 years at 2.04% (1.69%, 2.46% [95% confidence intervals]), or approximately 1 in 50”.³⁵

Earlier, in November 2020, the Government published SAGE subgroup Children’s Task and Finish Group’s (TFC), [paper on children, schools and transmission](#). Its main conclusion was that:

In the second wave, prevalence has risen significantly in school age children, with the rise increasing initially among those in school year 12 (age 16/17) – age 24 and young people (e.g. secondary school age). The rising prevalence was first visible around the time that schools reopened. While this may be indicative of a potential role for school opening, causation, including the extent to which transmission is occurring in schools, is unproven and difficult to establish.³⁶

Also in November 2020, the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviours (SPI-B) and the Department for Education (DfE) prepared a joint paper, [The benefits of remaining in education: Evidence and considerations](#).³⁷ This concluded that there was evidence of negative educational, social, health and emotional outcomes from school closures, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged children. The paper also notes that school closures could not be understood in isolation “and tend to be accompanied by other restrictions (e.g. mixing beyond school, cancellation of sporting activities) and increased pressure on households (e.g. parents working from home, financial pressures).”³⁸

On 31 December 2020, SAGE published minutes to its meeting on 22 December 2020. This said:

It is highly unlikely that measures with stringency and adherence in line with the measures in England in November (i.e. with schools open) would be sufficient to maintain R below 1 in the presence of the new variant. R would be lower with schools closed, with closure of secondary schools likely to have a greater effect than closure of primary schools.

It remains difficult to distinguish where transmission between children takes place, and it is important to consider contacts made outside of schools. It is not known whether measures with similar stringency and adherence as Spring, with both primary and secondary schools closed, would be sufficient to bring R below 1 in the presence of the new variant. The introduction of Tier 4 measures in England combined with the school holidays will be informative of the strength of measures required to control the

³⁵ Riley, Steven et. al., [REACT-1 round 7 updated report: regional heterogeneity in changes in prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 infection during the second national COVID-19 lockdown in England](#), 15 December 2020.

³⁶ Children’s Task and Finish Group (TFC), [‘Children’s Task and Finish Group: Update on Children, Schools and Transmission’](#), Endorsed by SAGE on 4 November 2020, published 13 November 2020.

³⁷ Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviours (SPI-B) and the Department for Education (DfE), [COVID-19: Benefits of remaining in education - evidence and considerations, 4 November 2020](#) (published 13 November 2020).

³⁸ As above, p1.

new variant but analysis of this will not be possible until mid-January.³⁹

Also on 31 December 2020, the Children’s Task and Finish sub-group (TFC) also published an update on children and transmission. Their main conclusions were that:

- Accumulating evidence was “consistent with increased transmission occurring amongst school children when schools are open, particularly in children of secondary school age”. Multiple sources showed a reduction in transmission in children following the October half term school closures, and increase following re-opening. The size of the effect, however, was harder to quantify, as was the level of transmission within schools compared to other settings.
- Recent data from both the ONS’s Coronavirus Infection Study and from Imperial’s REACT-1 programme suggested the highest positivity rates were among children of secondary school age.
- Data on infection rates before and during school half term, when considered alongside other evidence, “indicates a role of schools being open in transmission in children.” There was not enough evidence, TFC said, on the size of the effect of school closures, or to gauge the impact on the wider community.

TFC’s report also considered the current evidence on impacts on children and young people and on school staff.⁴⁰

1.5 Funding for schools

The DfE has introduced a number of additional funding streams for schools and pupils, specifically related to the pandemic. Schools also continued to receive their regular recurrent funding for the duration of the widespread disruption in the summer 2020 term. Additional funding includes:

[Exceptional costs funding](#) for certain additional costs incurred during the period March to July 2020:

- additional cleaning associated with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases;
- support for free school meals for where this was not covered by the national voucher scheme;
- Some increased premises related costs.

A second claims period closed on 22 December 2020. The DfE published [guidance on how to make a claim](#).

³⁹ Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE), [Minutes to Seventy-fourth SAGE meeting on COVID-19, 22nd December 2020](#), published 31 December 2020, p1-2.

⁴⁰ Children’s Task and Finish Group, [Update to 4th Nov 2020 paper on children, schools and transmission 17 December 2020](#), published 31 December 2021, p1-3.

- A [universal catch-up premium](#) and the [National Tutoring Programme](#) – in recognition of lost face-to-face teaching for schools.
- [Funding for digital devices and 4G routers](#), for disadvantaged children unable to attend school because of closures or self-isolation requirements.
- Home to school transport: In August 2020, Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, [announced](#) an additional £40 million funding for local authorities to support school transport provision in the autumn term during the pandemic.⁴¹
- Additional funding for free school meals during the initial lockdown, and during the Easter, May half term, and summer holidays. A COVID Winter Grant Scheme, to be run by councils in England, has subsequently been announced to provide support from December 2020 to March 2021. Further details on funding for school meals and holiday activities can be found in another Library briefing paper, [School meals and nutritional standards \(England\)](#)
- Further funding for free school meals, and digital devices, during the Spring 2021 lockdown.⁴²
- The DfE has [also confirmed](#) it is providing additional high need funding of £730 million in 2021-22, and says this will take the overall SEND budget to “more than £8 billion” in 2021-22.
- A [COVID workforce fund](#), to cover the second half of the autumn 2020 term. This funding would be available to schools and colleges “facing the greatest combined staffing and funding pressures”. In order to be eligible, institutions need to meet financial and teacher/ lecturer absence thresholds.⁴³

⁴¹ Department for Education press release, '[Multi-million-pound funding package for school transport](#)', 8 August 2020.

⁴² Speech by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, '[Prime Minister's address to the nation: 4 January 2021](#)'

⁴³ Department for Education press release, '[New funding to support schools and colleges during Covid pandemic](#)', 27 November 2020.

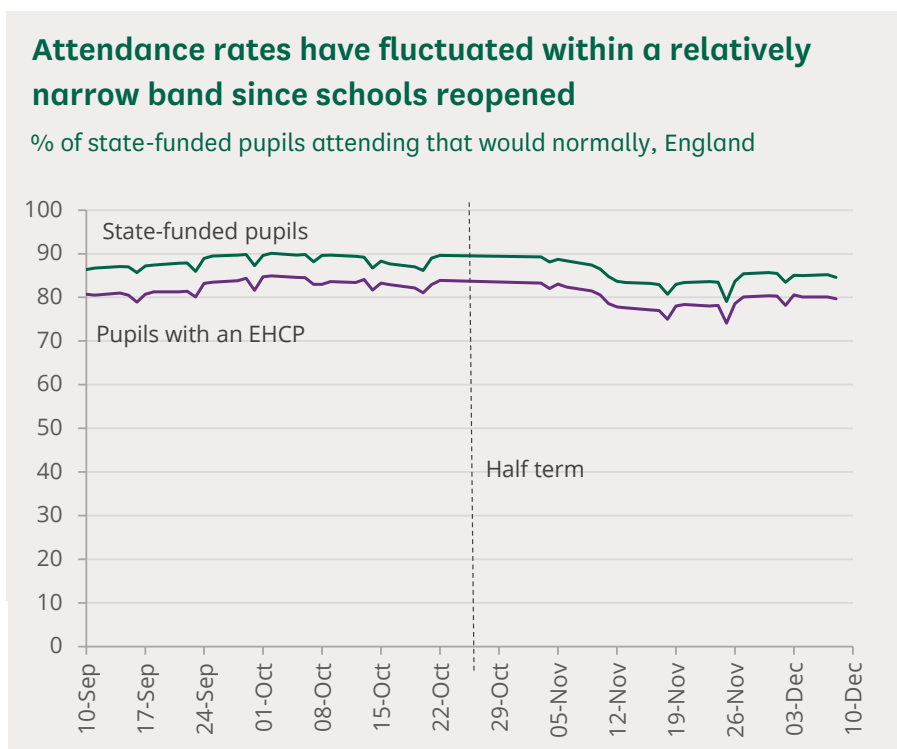
2. School attendance statistics

The DfE has published estimates for the number of pupils in priority groups attending school since 23 March and, from the autumn 2020 term, data on attendance and absence due to COVID-19. This has been based on the absence and attendance figures that [schools have provided](#) to them. Comparable absence data is available for the period 12 October to 10 December 2020 inclusive.

The published figures are **estimates** because they have been adjusted for non-responses using certain assumptions. Lower response rates from schools can make these estimates less accurate. There have been changes to the information schools have been asked to return, and also changes to how the resulting data has been reported, over time, which mean that care must be taken when looking at trends. Further detail about Covid-19 infections can be found within the [coronavirus in the UK dashboard](#), [national COVID-19 surveillance reports](#) and [coronavirus infection survey pilot statistics](#).

2.1 School absence and attendance rates in the autumn 2020 term (England)

The chart below shows the percentage of pupils reported as attending state-funded schools since the beginning of the autumn 2020 term. The DfE also publishes data on the percentage of pupils with a social worker who are attending (not shown in the chart below) – rates for this group have very closely tracked the rate for pupils with EHC plans.



Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. Education Health and Care plan is known as an EHCP.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 15 December 2020, DfE](#)

The average attendance rates in the chart above mask some differences between typical attendance levels in primary and secondary schools. As at 10 December 2020, attendance at **state-funded primaries was 89%**, whereas **for secondary, it was 80%**.

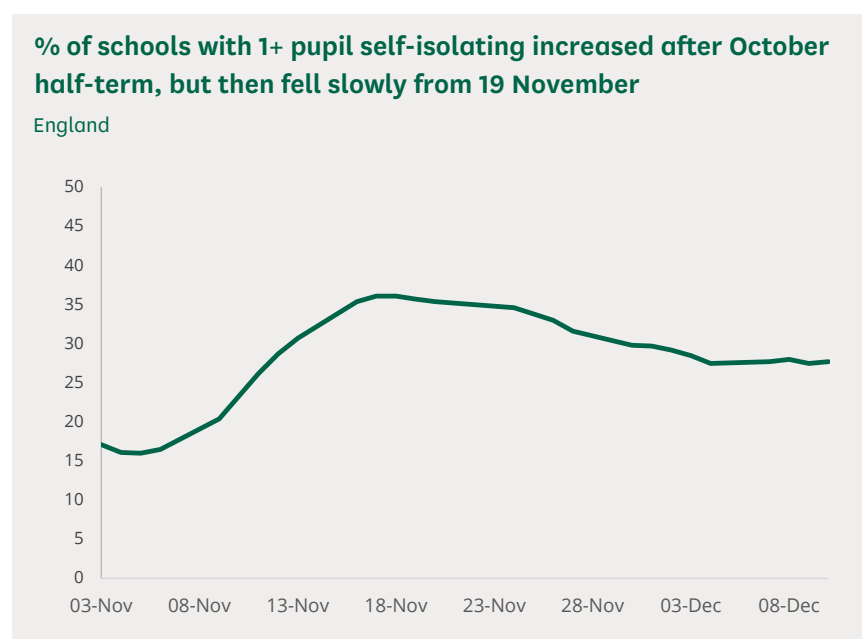
Further breakdown on reasons for absence

The information collected from schools by the DfE has changed over time; from 12 October 2020, it began collecting more detailed information on reasons for absence. Not all absence from school will be due to COVID-19-related reasons. As at 10 December 2020, the DfE estimated that around **7-9% of state-funded school pupils did not attend for COVID-19-related reasons**. This included:

- **0.2% of pupils with a confirmed case** of coronavirus – similar to the previous week’s rate, and **0.4% of pupils with a suspected case** of coronavirus – up slightly from the previous week.
- **6.6-7.3% of pupils self-isolating due to potential contact** with a case of coronavirus, up slightly from the previous week.
- **0.6% of pupils in schools closed** for COVID-19 related reasons – up slightly from the previous week.⁴⁴

Students self-isolating because of close contact with COVID-19 at school

The chart below shows the proportion of schools reporting one or more pupils self-isolating because of contact with a COVID-19 case within the school.



Note: Figures relate to pupils self-isolating because of contact with a confirmed case within the school community. No comparable data exists for the period prior to half-term.

⁴⁴ Department for Education, [Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#), 15 December 2020

Source: Department for Education, [Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#), 15 December 2020.

Size of groups sent home

There are differences in the typical size of groups sent home to self-isolate, for primary and secondary schools. As at 10 December 2020, the median group size for primary schools was around 14-15% of pupils on roll, whilst at secondary schools it was around 7-8% of pupils on roll. The DfE reports that, on average, these proportions equate to the size of a year group in primary schools and just under half a year group in secondary schools.

The data suggests that as at 10 December 2020, the median number of pupils isolating per confirmed case **was 24 for secondary schools, and 30 for primary schools**. Schools not reporting any pupils self-isolating were excluded from this analysis.⁴⁵

Regional and local authority-level data

The DfE now also publishes data on COVID-19-related absence and attendance at regional and local authority level, although data at LA level is not adjusted for non-response. Given considerable differences in response rates between LA areas (from 27% to 100%) and variation in the number of schools in particular areas, this means we should be cautious about 'ranking' local authorities by attendance.

At the regional level:

- All regions showed attendance increasing or remaining relatively stable until the October half term. Afterwards, attendance decreased in all regions, before recovering (albeit not fully) in late November and December.
- The South West, South East and East of England had the highest attendance throughout most of the autumn term, but in the most recent weeks attendance in the SE and East of England has fallen.
- From mid-September until October half term, the North West had the lowest attendance, switching to the North East, West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber.
- By early December, London and the South East had the lowest rates of attendance.

⁴⁵ Source: Department for Education, [Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak, 15 December 2020](#).

3. What evidence do we have about differences in home learning?

3.1 UCL Institute of Education survey

The [UCL Institute of Education](#) analysed survey data about home schooling from a sample of UK households which included 4,559 children. The survey was carried out in the last two weeks of April. The results were then adjusted to provide UK wide **estimates**.

The survey found the average amount of schoolwork that pupils were doing in a day was low (two and a half hours).

The survey also found large differences between pupils' home learning experiences when broken down by free school meal (FSM) status.

For example, an estimated 25% of pupils eligible for FSM spent no time or less than one hour on schoolwork in a day compared to 18% of pupils not eligible. In addition, an estimated 11% of pupils eligible for FSM spent four hours or more on schoolwork in a day compared to 19% of pupils not eligible.⁴⁶

The survey also found an estimated 20% of FSM pupils had no access to a computer at home. This compares to 7% for other children.⁴⁷

3.2 Teacher Tapp survey

[Teacher Tapp](#) have asked a range of survey questions to a sample of around 7,000 teachers several times per week during the school closures. The results are then adjusted to provide national **estimates**.

The survey found very large differences between teachers' perceptions of state and private sector pupils' home learning environments, and also the average amount of online learning time.⁴⁸

For example, 5% of private school teachers thought that more than 20% of the children in their class did not have access to an electronic device for learning (as of 25 March). In contrast, 15% of state-funded teachers thought the same.

In addition, 13% of private school teachers thought that pupils were learning less than one hour per day (as of 27 March). In contrast, 42% of state-funded school teachers thought the same.

The following charts show that there were also large differences in responses within the state-funded sector when schools are broken down by deprivation.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ UCL Institute of Education, [Schoolwork in lockdown: new evidence on the epidemic of educational poverty](#), p19

⁴⁷ UCL Institute of Education, [Schoolwork in lockdown: new evidence on the epidemic of educational poverty](#), p10

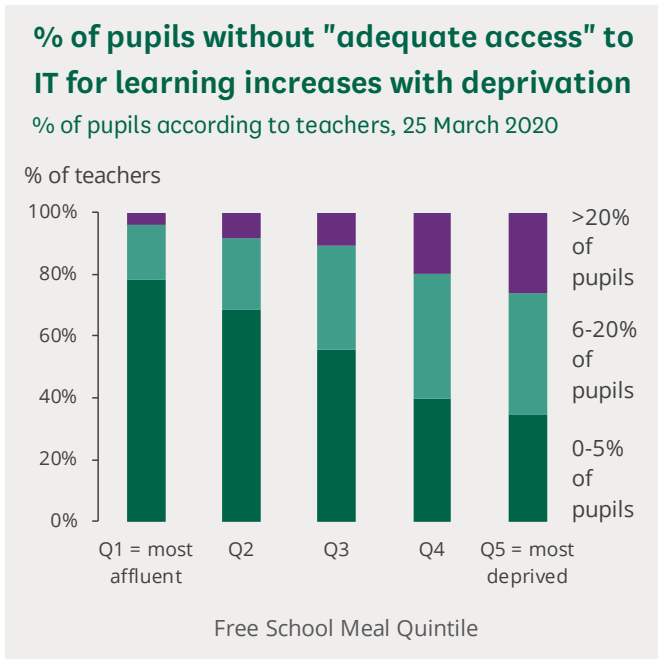
⁴⁸ NA responses have been excluded

⁴⁹ As above.

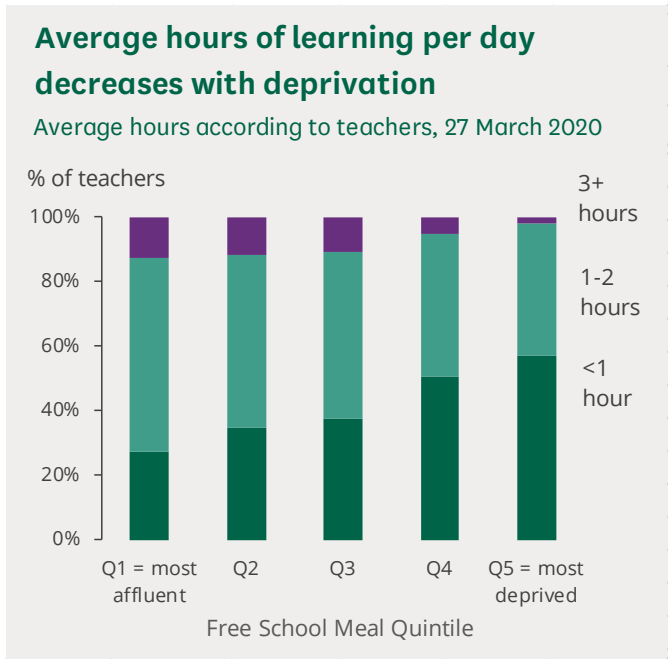
For example, in the least deprived state-funded schools 4% of teachers thought that more than 20% of the children in their class did not have access to an electronic device (as of 25 March). In contrast, 26% of teachers in the most deprived schools thought the same.

In addition, in the least deprived state-funded schools 27% of teachers thought that pupils were learning less than one hour per day (as of 27 March). In contrast, 57% of teachers in the most deprived schools thought the same.

Some disadvantaged pupils without digital devices or internet access are eligible for Government support. Further details about this scheme are available [here](#).



Notes: All figures are estimates
 6,877 teachers responded to this survey question
 NA responses have been excluded (3-5% of sample)
 Source: [Monitoring Covid-19 readiness in schools: Q3144 25 March, Teacher Tapp \(Google doc\)](#)



Notes: All figures are estimates
 2,068 teachers responded to this survey question
 NA responses have been excluded (4-7% of sample)
 Source: [Monitoring Covid-19 readiness in schools: Q3143 27 March, Teacher Tapp \(Google doc\)](#)

3.3 Institute for Fiscal Studies survey

Between 29 April and 12 May, the Institute for Fiscal Studies ([IFS](#)) surveyed around 4,000 parents with children aged 4-15 about their home learning activities and resources. The results were then adjusted to provide national **estimates**.

The IFS survey found large differences between state and private school parents' responses about the provision of online learning resources from schools. The results also showed large differences within the state sector when broken down by family deprivation levels.⁵⁰

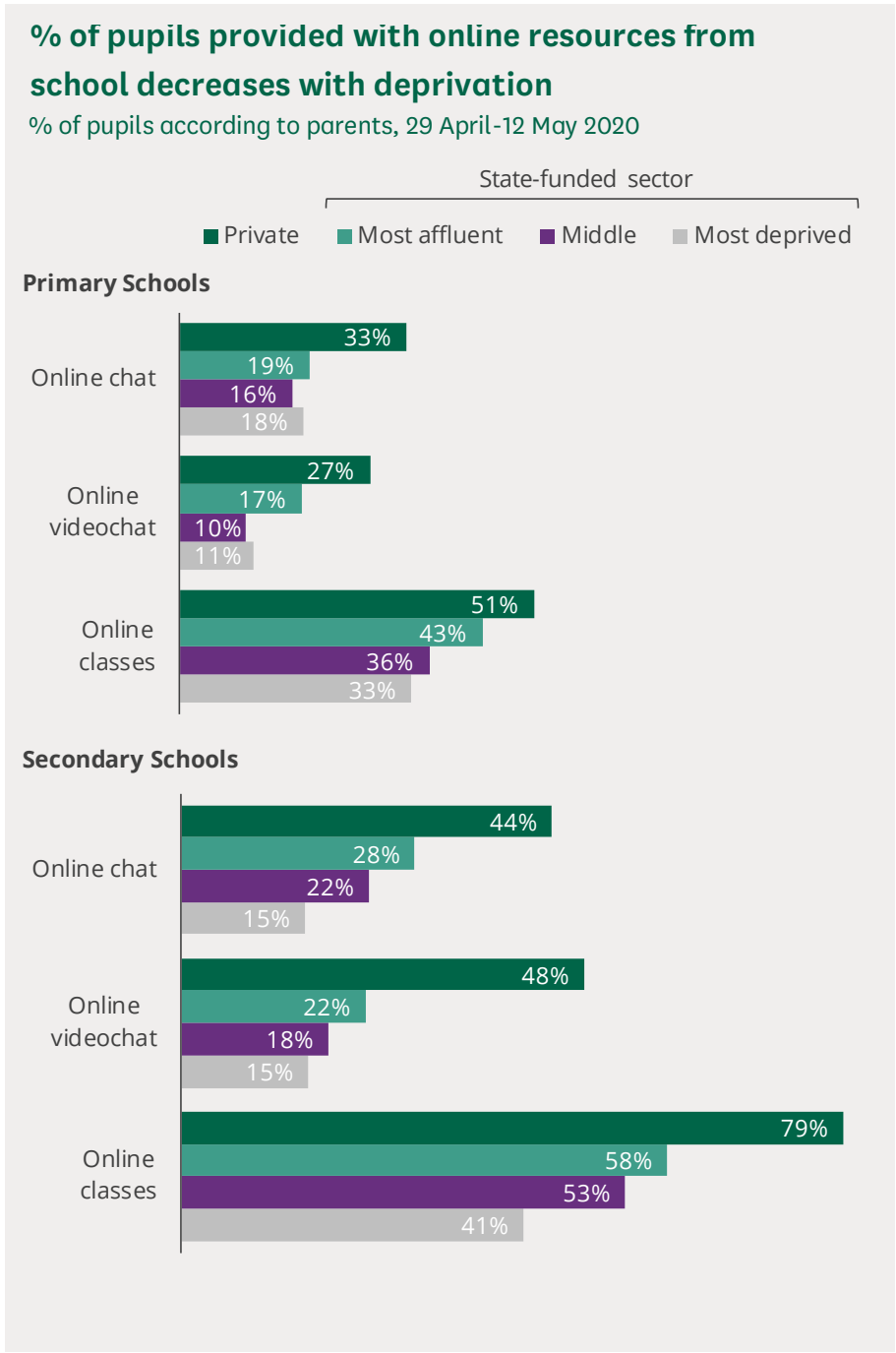
For example, the proportion of parents that report their child's primary school has provided online classes⁵¹ (regardless of whether or not the child has attended them) is 51% for children attending private schools, 43% for the most affluent in state-funded schools and 33% for the most deprived in state-funded schools.

The differences were more pronounced in secondary schools. For example, the proportion of parents that report their child's school has provided online classes is 79% for children attending private schools, 58% for the most affluent in state-funded schools and 41% for the most deprived in state-funded schools.

The IFS concluded from the survey results findings overall that "school closures are almost certain to increase educational inequalities".⁵²

⁵¹ There may be differences in the way parents from different groups interpret what is meant by 'online classes'. Some schools are offering short online catch-ups while others are running full lessons.

⁵² IFS, [Learning during the lockdown](#), 18 May 2020, p3



Notes: All figures are estimates based on a survey sample of 3,091 primary parents and 1,554 secondary school parents. Parents were asked, 'Which of the following activities has [child]'s school provided while schools are closed? Please tick all that apply.' Deprivation quintiles are based on equivalised pre-pandemic family earnings, only most affluent, middle, and most deprived quintiles are shown here.

Source: [Learning during the lockdown](#): 18 May 2020, IFS ("Underlying data", Fig4)

3.4 National Foundation for Educational Research study

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) surveyed a sample of around 3,000 teachers and school leaders in July 2020. Writing about these results in the context of school re-opening in September 2020, they noted:

- Estimates suggested that pupils were, on average, three months behind in their learning.
- Teachers in the most deprived schools were over three times more likely to report that their learners were four or more months behind.
- Teachers estimated that 44 per cent of pupils were in need of intensive catch-up support.⁵³

3.5 Further reading

- Sutton Trust, [Covid-19 impacts: school shutdown](#), 20 April 2020
- Centre for Economic Performance, [Covid-19 school shutdowns: What will they do to our children's education?](#), May 2020
- Education Endowment Foundation, [Impact of school closures on the attainment gap](#), June 2020
- Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, [Home schooling during lockdown: inequalities in inputs and perceptions](#), 5 June 2020
- UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies, [Parental involvement in home schooling and developmental play during lockdown](#), July 2020
- IFS, [Primary school closures created substantial inequality in time spent learning between pupils from poorer and better-off families](#), 17 August 2020

⁵³ National Foundation for Educational Research, '[Schools' responses to Covid-19 The challenges facing schools and pupils in September 2020](#)', 1 September 2020.

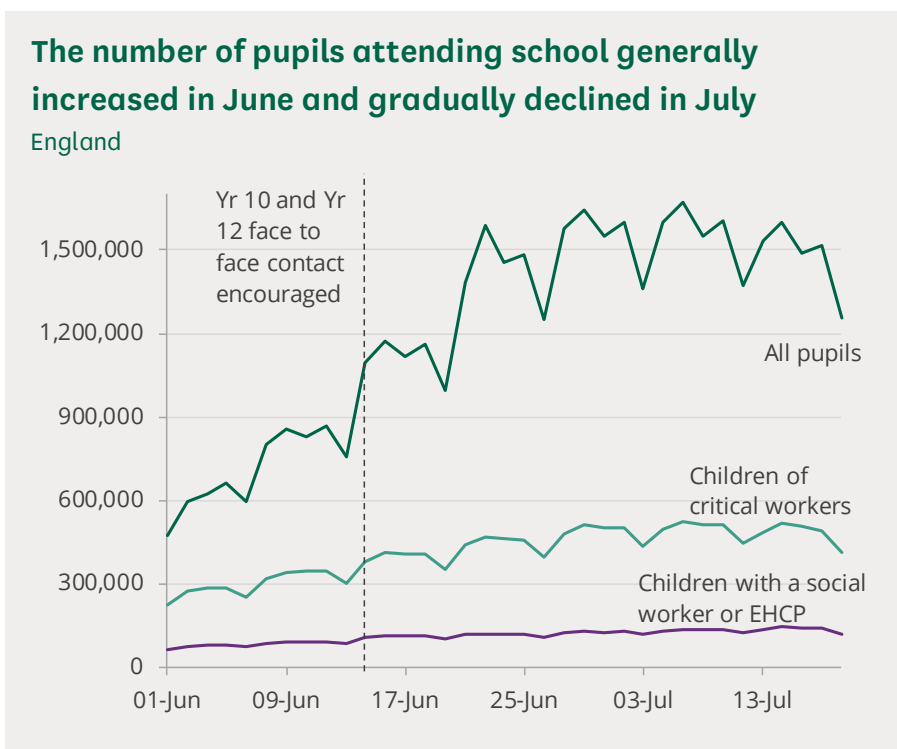
4. Annexe: school attendance statistics, March to July 2020 (England)

4.1 School attendance rates during the partial reopening

Government guidance as of 1 June encouraged nursery, reception, year 1, and year 6 pupils to attend school in person, in England. From 15 June schools were encouraged to provide some face to face contact time for year 10 and year 12 pupils.

Between 1 June and 17 July, the response rate of schools to the DfE's request for daily attendance data has varied between 55% and 77% of establishments.

After 17 July the survey which collects attendance data was closed for the Summer holidays.



Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. From 1 June the year groups encouraged to attend school were reception, year 1, and year 6. From 15 June schools have been encouraged to provide some face-to-face contact time in school for those in year 10 and year 12. Education Health and Care plan is known as an EHCP.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 17 July 2020, DfE](#)

Summary Statistics

As of Friday 17 July 2020 (the last data available before the Summer holiday period):⁵⁴

- Around 1,253,000 pupils attended schools in England. This was an estimated 13.1% of pupils that would normally attend. This was a decrease from an estimated 14.4% the previous week.
- Around 14,300 schools were open to nursery, reception, year 1 **or** year 6 (an estimated 71% of the schools that are normally open to these year groups). This was a decrease from 77% for the previous week.
- Around 3,200 schools were open to year 10 **or** year 12 (an estimated 55% of the schools that are normally open to these year groups). This was a decrease from 65% the previous week.
- Around 20,500 schools in total were open (an estimated 83% of schools that are normally open). This was a decrease from 89% the previous week.

4.2 School attendance rates prior to 1 June 2020

From Monday 23 March, the Department for Education (DfE) [asked schools to report](#) daily attendance figures for vulnerable children, and the children of critical workers. Due to the reasons outlined above it is not appropriate to compare attendance data from before and after 1 June.

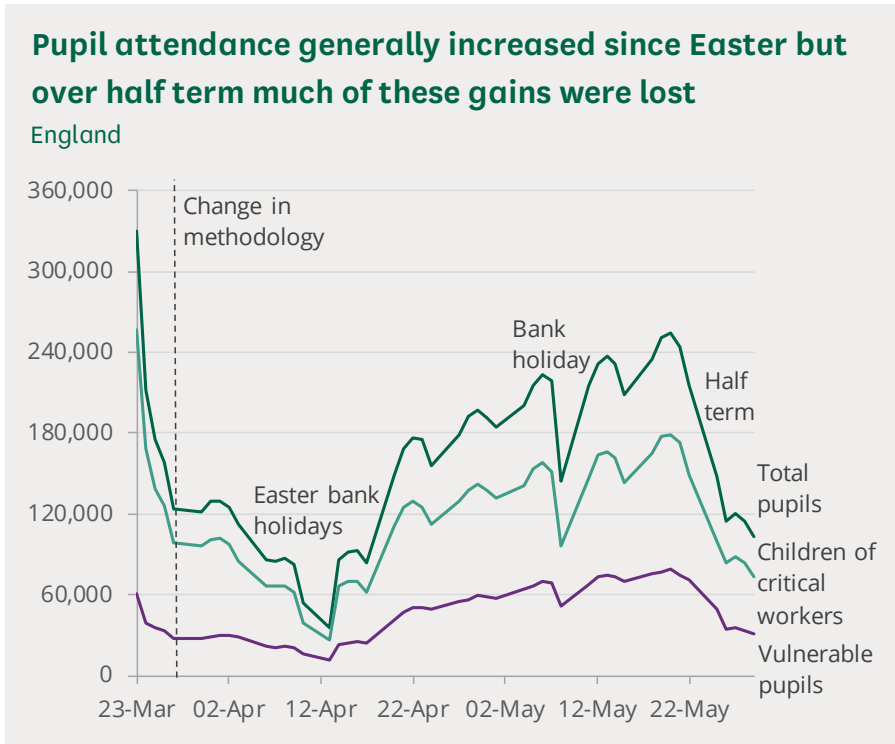
Over this comparable period (27 March to 29 May), the response rate of schools varied between 12% and 74% (the low response rate was on 25 May, a bank holiday during what is usually half term).

Summary Statistics

As illustrated in the following chart, in the first two weeks of the comparable period (27 March to 29 May), the number of pupils attending school in person followed a downward trend in general, but this reversed rapidly after the Easter bank holidays among both children of critical workers and vulnerable pupils. Attendance increased (excluding the dip on the Early May Bank holiday) and peaked at around 254,000 pupils on 20 May. The following week was what is usually half term. During this week attendance levels declined and erased much of the increases in attendance since Easter.

In addition to these trends, attendance levels also tend to fluctuate within the week. In general, the highest numbers of pupils attended in the middle of each week.

⁵⁴ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 17 July 2020, DfE](#)
(p5-6)



Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. The methodology for the adjustment changed from Friday 27 March, this means like for like comparisons before this time cannot be made. Caution should be taken for the results of 1 May, 13 May, 15 May. Due to technical issues with the DfE sign-in, lower rates of establishments were able to record attendance. The response rates were also lower on the bank and school holidays. The DfE cautions that vulnerable children attendance figures are underestimates.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#)

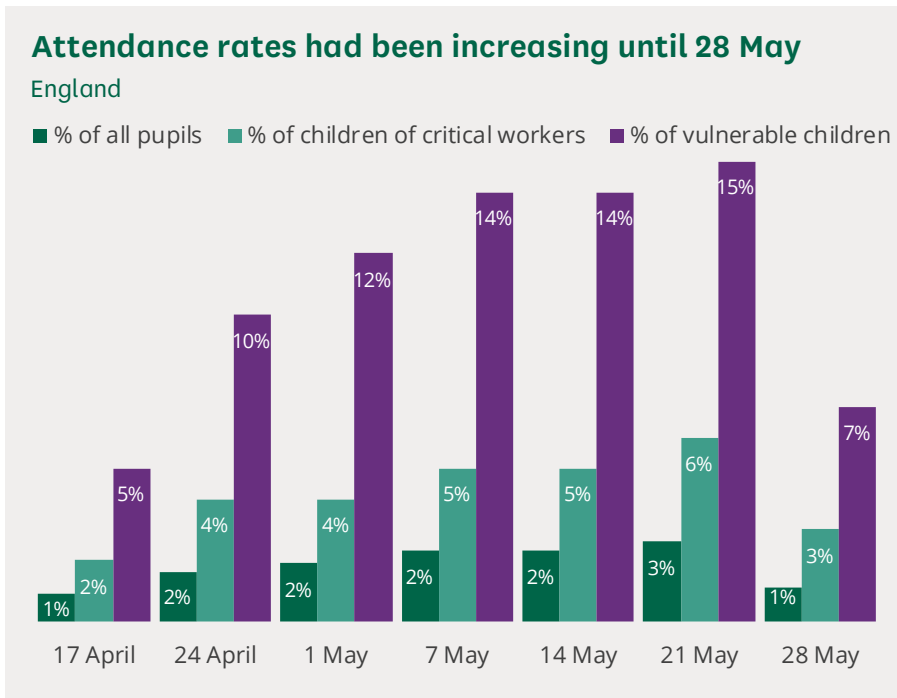
The number of pupils attending school in person expressed as a proportion of the children that would normally attend followed similar trends as above. Overall it remained consistently low. During the comparable period (27 March to 28 May) this proportion ranged between 0.4% and 2.7%.

The DfE also estimated the number of pupils attending school expressed as a proportion of those that are eligible to attend on a weekly snapshot basis since Friday 17 April. The most recent snapshot within the comparable period was as of 28 May, which recorded lower rates of attendance from the previous week.

As shown in the following chart, between Friday 17 April and Thursday 28 May, the proportion of both vulnerable pupils and children of critical workers attending school had been increasing gradually, until 28 May (which would usually have been half term).

Tom Hunt MP stated in an Education Select Committee [oral evidence session](#) that the uptake of school places among children of critical

workers and vulnerable pupils was lower than the Government’s initial expectations of “around 20%”.⁵⁵



Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. Due to technical issues with the DfE sign-in, on 1 May only 14% of establishments were able to record attendance. The DfE cautions that attendance rates of vulnerable children are underestimates.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#)

A breakdown was also published by setting type on a weekly snapshot basis since 30 April, the most recent snapshot within the comparable period was 28 May. Unsurprisingly, pupil attendance rates were highest in non-mainstream settings and lowest in mainstream settings for older pupils. The attendance rate varied between less than 0.5% in further education and secondary school settings, and 20% in special post 16 institutions.

⁵⁵ Education Select Committee, [The impact of covid19 on education and children’s services](#), 22 April 2020. (Q16)

Pupil attendance was highest in non-mainstream settings

28 May 2020, England

	Establishment Response rate	% of open establishments	% of pupils attending
Special post 16 institution	21%	49%	20%
Alternative provision	17%	40%	2-4%
Special	25%	48%	3%
State-funded nursery	21%	41%	3%
State-funded primary	36%	53%	2%
Independent school	10%	40%	1%
State-funded secondary	40%	60%	<0.5%
Further Education	15%	28%	<0.5%
Total	33%	52%	1%

Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. Figures are ranked in the table by % of pupils attending. The DfE estimated a range of pupil attendance for alternative provision to communicate the uncertainty involved. This is due to pupils at these settings often being enrolled in other settings as well.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#)

4.3 Infection and outbreak data - evidence from second half of summer term 2020 (England)

Public Health England (PHE) calculated Coronavirus infection rates for staff and students attending all education settings in England between 1 June and 31 July. PHE highlighted that because their findings were from a period when schools were only partially reopened (with stringent infection control measures and while attendance was not mandatory) they may not be generalisable to the conditions when schools fully reopen. In addition, the small sample of open secondary schools meant their findings were “not likely to be generalisable to secondary schools”.⁵⁶

During the 1 June – 31 July period, there were a total of 198 confirmed cases (70 students and 128 in staff members) across all educational settings in England.⁵⁷

PHE also published both infections and attendance data for certain settings (early years, primary and secondary schools). This means that the estimated proportion of pupils infected can be calculated for these types of settings.

⁵⁶ Same as above (page 12)

⁵⁷ Public Health England, [SARS-CoV-2 infection and transmission in educational settings: cross-sectional analysis of clusters and outbreaks in England](#), 23 August 2020 (page 3)

During the period there were a total of 174 confirmed cases (67 students and 107 in staff members) in early years, primary and secondary schools. The vast majority of cases occurred in early years and primary schools (65 students) and a minority in secondary schools (2 students).⁵⁸

The number of confirmed cases expressed as a proportion of the average number of students attending these settings was less than 0.01%, and for teachers it was around 0.02%.⁵⁹

The proportion of these settings with at least one infection was around 0.17%. However, this does not take into account the possibility that during the period subsequent infections occurred at the same setting.⁶⁰

These findings suggested that overall infections and outbreaks were “uncommon” across all educational settings, especially compared to other institutions such as hospitals, care homes, prisons and certain workplace settings. This is in line with findings from other countries.⁶¹

The study also found there was a “strong correlation” between the number of outbreaks and regional COVID-19 incidence which “emphasises the importance of controlling community transmission to protect educational settings”.⁶²

⁵⁸ Public Health England, [SARS-CoV-2 infection and transmission in educational settings: cross-sectional analysis of clusters and outbreaks in England](#), 23 August 2020 (Table 1)

⁵⁹ Same as above (Table 1)

⁶⁰ Same as above (Table 1)

⁶¹ Same as above (page 10)

⁶² Same as above (page 2)

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