National Audit Office

Support for children's education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic

Department for Education

REPORT

by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Department for Education

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

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Key facts

23 March 2020

date from which schools first closed to all pupils except vulnerable children and children of critical workers

98%

proportion of pupils whom teachers reported in a survey were behind where they would normally expect them to be in their curriculum learning at the end of the 2019/20 academic year

£1bn

amount of funding the Department for Education announced in June 2020 that it would provide for catch-up learning, with a further £700 million announced in February 2021

26%	weekly average proportion of vulnerable pupils who were attending school or college by the end of the summer term in July 2020
15%	decrease in the number of referrals to children's social care services during the weeks surveyed between 27 April and 16 August 2020, compared with the average for the same period over the previous three years
29%	proportion of primary school leaders who reported in May 2020 that their main approach to in-school provision was extra-curricular activities such as arts, crafts or games rather than curriculum content
220,000	average number of daily users of Oak National Academy, the online learning resource funded by the Department for Education, between 20 April and 12 July 2020
30%	estimate in May 2020 of the additional amount of time that children from higher-income families spent on remote learning, compared with children from lower-income families
36%	median estimate of the possible growth in the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers from March to September 2020 as a result of school closures in the 2019/20 academic year

All dates in this report relate to 2020 unless otherwise stated.

Throughout this report, central government financial years are written as, for example, '2020-21' and run from 1 April to 31 March; school academic years are written '2020/21' and run from 1 September to 31 August.

Summary

1 In March 2020, there were almost 21,600 state schools in England, educating 8.2 million pupils aged four to 19. Around 12,500 of these schools (58% of the total), with 3.8 million pupils, were maintained schools, funded and overseen by local authorities. The remaining 9,000 schools (42%) were academies, with 4.4 million pupils. Each academy school is part of an academy trust, directly funded by the Department for Education (the Department) and independent of the relevant local authority.

2 The Department is responsible for the school system, and is ultimately accountable for securing value for money from the funding provided for schools. For 2020-21, the Department's budget to support schools' core activities totalled £47.6 billion. The Department works with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (the ESFA), which distributes the funding and provides assurance about how the money has been used. Ofsted inspects schools and provides independent assurance about their effectiveness, including the quality of education.

3 On 18 March 2020, the government announced that, to help limit transmission of the COVID-19 virus, from 23 March schools would close to all pupils except vulnerable children and children of critical workers. Education for most children would therefore take place remotely at home. The Secretary of State also announced that Ofsted would suspend routine inspections, to help schools focus on their core functions.

4 Schools faced a range of uncertainties in responding to COVID-19 – for example, it was unclear how long the pandemic would last and what children's role in transmitting the virus was – and had to respond to rapidly developing events. The school workforce had to adapt to new ways of working and continue educating pupils in stressful and uncertain circumstances. Schools also had fewer staff available, since some contracted the virus while others had to shield at home.

5 Schools partially re-opened on 1 June, to children in reception classes and years 1 and 6. In mid-June, schools began providing face-to-face support to students in years 10 and 12 to supplement their remote learning. However, most children did not return to school until the new academic year began in September.

Focus of our report

6 The closure of schools to most children between March and July 2020, and the associated switch to remote learning, was unprecedented. It formed an important part of the wider effort to reduce transmission of COVID-19 by means of a national 'lockdown'. The change had a major impact on schools and children, both those who continued to attend school and those who learnt remotely, and their parents or carers. It raised concerns about the potential effect on children's education and well-being, and many observers believed that vulnerable and disadvantaged children, in particular, would be adversely affected.

7 During this period the Department had to deal with significant operational challenges, particularly in the weeks immediately before and after the national lockdown began, which tested its capacity and resilience. These challenges included: dealing with uncertain and fast-moving circumstances as the pandemic evolved; managing with higher levels of staff absence as a result of the virus; adapting to new ways of working, including the shift to remote working; putting in place arrangements where key staff worked for extended periods to cover evenings and weekends; and identifying priorities across the whole range of its policy responsibilities.

8 This report examines the Department's support for children's education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic between March and July 2020, and its action to help children catch up on the learning they lost during that period. We focused particularly on disadvantaged and vulnerable children.[1] Also, where appropriate, the report refers to the additional guidance, support or requirements that the Department continued to roll out for the 2020/21 academic year. We did not assess the Department's actions during the second major period of disrupted schooling that began in January 2021.

9 The report covers: the Department's overall response to the pandemic (Part One); the support provided for children's learning, both in school and remotely (Part Two); and the impact of disrupted schooling on children (Part Three). We set out our audit approach in Appendix One and our evidence base in Appendix Two. A timeline of key events in the school system between March and July 2020 is in Appendix Three.

1 This report covers the Department's efforts to support disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils. In this context, 'disadvantage' refers to economic deprivation, and disadvantaged pupils are often categorised as those who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals. The concept of 'vulnerable' pupils is broader, but typically means children who have been assessed as 'in need' under the Children Act 1989, or have an education, health and care plan because they have complex special educational needs and disabilities, as well as children assessed as 'otherwise vulnerable' at local level.

Key findings

The Department's response to COVID-19 in the school system

10 From April 2020, the Department prepared COVID-19 response plans for its support for schools and vulnerable children, but it did not develop an overarching departmental plan until June. The Department had no pre-existing plan for managing mass disruption to schooling on the scale caused by COVID-19. Its emergency response function was designed to manage localised disruption – for example, in the event of floods. It activated this function in late January. In early April, it established nine regional education and children's teams, which had a particular focus on vulnerable children. Without an established plan, the Department's response to the pandemic was largely reactive. It prioritised continuing to fund schools and other education providers, and communicating with the sectors it oversees. From April, the Department developed COVID-19 response plans for its support for schools and vulnerable children, including high-level milestones, risks and dependencies. However, it was not until the end of June that it began to formulate a plan that set out objectives, milestones and risks at a departmental level. At the time of our work, the Department had not carried out a systematic exercise to evaluate its response during the early stages of the pandemic and identify lessons for potential future disruption to schooling (paragraphs 1.4, 1.5, 1.8, 1.9 and 1.20).

11 In the early stages, the Department set no requirements for in-school and remote learning, but became more directive as the pandemic progressed. The school system is devolved, with power resting at local level, and the Department does not control schools. Early in 2020, the Department was unsure whether it would be able to persuade schools to close if that became necessary. In the event, schools closed to most children voluntarily from 23 March and the Department did not use the powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020, which took effect on 25 March. Between March and July, the Department's approach was to offer guidance and support to schools, rather than to mandate requirements, recognising the challenges that schools were facing, including staff shortages. In guidance published in July, which focused on schools re-opening in September, the Department emphasised that it expected pupils learning at home to have access to high-quality online and offline resources linked to the school's normal curriculum. The Department decided that, for 2020/21, it needed to make clearer schools' responsibility to provide remote learning, given the risk of continued disruption to normal schooling. It therefore placed a legal duty on schools, which came into force on 22 October. The suspension of routine Ofsted inspections reduced the level of independent assurance about schools' effectiveness during the period (paragraphs 1.10 to 1.14).

12 At January 2021, the Department had paid, or intended to pay, schools £133 million (73%) of the £181 million they had claimed for exceptional costs arising from COVID-19 between March and July 2020. The Department made funding available only to schools that could not meet their additional costs from existing resources, or could do so only by drawing on reserves and undermining their long-term financial sustainability. The amount that schools could claim was limited. For the 2019/20 summer term, the Department funded schools for three categories of exceptional costs: providing free school meals; opening school premises during the Easter and summer half-term holidays; and additional cleaning due to COVID-19 outbreaks. Within the £181 million total, schools made £42 million of claims outside these categories, for example for costs relating to personal protective equipment, technology for children's home learning, and additional staff. The Department did not reimburse schools for any of these other claims relating to the 2019/20 summer term (paragraphs 1.16 to 1.18, and Figure 2).

13 The timeliness and volume of the Department's guidance caused difficulties for schools. The Department published many guidance documents and often updated them, as government developed its response to the evolving pandemic. For example, the Department calculated that, between mid-March and 28 April, it published more than 150 new documents and updates to existing material. Stakeholders told us that guidance was often published at the end of the week or late in the evening, putting schools under pressure, especially when guidance was for immediate implementation. They also said that, when the Department updated guidance, schools were not always clear what changes it had made. An informal survey of its members by the Chartered College of Teaching found that 67% of respondents thought the Department's guidance on remote learning was unhelpful or very unhelpful. The figure for in-school learning was 58% (paragraphs 1.23 and 1.24).

14 Governments in other countries generally responded to the pandemic in a similar way to the Department. Our research suggests that most countries were largely unprepared for widespread disruption to schooling, and most closed schools and moved to remote learning. Education ministries commonly made educational resources available online, and many countries distributed electronic devices to support disadvantaged children. Where digital education was already an established part of the school system, this facilitated the move to remote learning (paragraph 1.27 and Figure 3).

Support for children's learning

15 Most vulnerable children did not attend school between late March and the end of the summer term, increasing risks to their safety and welfare. The Department viewed continued school attendance as an important way of safeguarding and supporting vulnerable children. The proportion of vulnerable children who attended school or college remained below 11% from 23 March to late May. Attendance increased gradually after schools partially re-opened in June and reached a weekly average of 26% by the end of the summer term. The Department and Ofsted were concerned that low school attendance could result in increased levels of hidden harm. A survey of local authorities found there were 82,890 referrals to children's social care services during the weeks surveyed between 27 April and 16 August, around 15% less than the average for the same period over the previous three years. Referrals remained generally lower than usual between September and early November (paragraphs 2.3 to 2.8, and Figure 4).

16 Provision for children attending school varied widely, with evidence suggesting those in the most deprived schools were less likely to be taught the curriculum. The Department told schools they were free to determine the type of provision they offered to children, but they should consider factors such as the children's mental health and well-being, and specific learning needs. A survey by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in May 2020 found that just less than half of schools reported teaching those pupils attending school the same curriculum content as was being sent to those learning remotely; 29% of primary school leaders reported their main approach was extra-curricular activities such as arts, crafts or games, compared with 7% of secondary schools. Leaders in the most deprived schools were twice as likely (37%) to report their main approach was providing extra-curricular activities as those in the least deprived schools (17%) (paragraphs 2.12 and 2.13, and Figure 5).

17 The Department funded a well-received national online resource to support schools and pupils with remote learning from April onwards. The Department initially provided £500,000 to help fund Oak National Academy, which was launched on 20 April. In June, it agreed to give a further £4.34 million to expand the material on offer for the 2020/21 academic year. Oak National Academy offers video lessons and other online resources. Its data indicate that, on average, 220,000 people used its website daily from 20 April to 12 July, mainly to access content for primary school pupils. Stakeholder groups we consulted felt Oak National Academy was a helpful, high-quality resource (paragraphs 2.15 to 2.17).

18 The Department provided laptops, tablets and 4G routers to a proportion of the children in need of support, but did not deliver most of the equipment until June. In early April, the Department considered providing devices for vulnerable children and those in priority year groups who did not have digital access. This would have involved providing 602,000 laptops or tablets and 100,000 routers in total. Due to the practical difficulty of supplying devices on this scale, the Department decided to focus on all children with a social worker and care leavers, alongside disadvantaged pupils in year 10 – a total of 220,000 laptops and tablets, and 50,000 routers. In total, it spent £95.5 million on IT equipment in the summer term. Most of the equipment was sourced from overseas. The Department received an initial 50,200 laptops and tablets by 11 May. It distributed most of the equipment to local authorities and academy trusts during June, meaning that many children may not have been able to access remote learning until well into the second half of the summer term. By the last full week of term, starting on 13 July, the Department had delivered 212,900 laptops and tablets, and 49,700 routers. It also trialled three schemes to provide enhanced internet access to children learning at home. The most successful approach involved mobile network operators providing extra data to existing customers at no additional cost. By January 2021, 10 operators had signed up for the scheme (paragraphs 2.18 to 2.23, and Figure 6).

19 Children had contrasting experiences in terms of the remote learning resources schools provided and the level of contact teachers maintained. A survey by Parentkind found that: 22% of parents were satisfied with the number of live online lessons provided by the school, while 50% were dissatisfied; and 38% were satisfied with the frequency of check-ins with parents, while 45% were dissatisfied. Resources that pupils accessed at a time of their choosing, rather than live online lessons, made up a significant part of schools' provision. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (the IFS) found that, at secondary level, the type of school-led provision varied by economic status. Some 82% of secondary pupils in private schools had received active help, such as online classes, or video and text chat. By contrast, 64% of secondary pupils in state schools from the richest one-fifth of households received active help, compared with 47% of pupils from the poorest one-fifth. Schools in more deprived areas may have held back from adopting online activities to limit the impact of pupils' unequal digital access at home (paragraphs 2.25 to 2.27).

20 Remote learning presented children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with a range of challenges. There is no consistent evidence about how long children spent on remote learning, with estimates ranging from around five hours to less than two hours a day on average. The barriers to effective home learning include having no quiet space to work, shortage of IT equipment and a lack of motivation. The IFS found that children from disadvantaged families had less access to study space and IT equipment, and the activities they did were less likely to benefit their educational attainment. It concluded that children from higher-income families spent around 30% more time on remote learning than children from lower-income families. It projected that, if normal schooling did not return until September and these rates of remote learning continued, the gap would represent 15 full school days (paragraphs 2.28 to 2.30).

Impact of disrupted schooling on children

21 The period of disrupted schooling is likely to have longer-term adverse effects on children's learning and development, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a growing body of evidence on the detrimental impact of the disruption to schooling. For example, in a July 2020 survey, NFER found that 98% of teachers considered their pupils were behind where they would normally expect them to be in their curriculum learning at the end of the 2019/20 academic year. On average, teachers estimated their pupils to be three months behind. Ofsted reports in late 2020 found primary school leaders most commonly identified that pupils had lost some of their knowledge and skills in reading, and that younger children were worst affected, with negative impacts on, for example, social and communication skills, speech and listening skills; in secondary schools, literacy and maths were also a concern. Early assessments expect disadvantaged children to have lost out disproportionately compared with their peers. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has projected that school closures in the 2019/20 academic year might widen the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers by between 11% and 75%, with a median estimate of 36%, likely reversing progress made to narrow the gap since 2011 (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.6).

22 In June 2020, the Department announced a £1 billion programme to help children and young people catch up on learning lost during the period of disrupted schooling. The programme consists of a £650 million universal catch-up premium allocated to schools on a per-pupil basis, and a £350 million National Tutoring Programme targeted at disadvantaged children. The National Tutoring Programme includes three elements: support for five- to 16-year-olds; a fund for students aged 16 to 19; and an early years language intervention. The support for children aged five to 16 comprises two schemes: a tuition partners scheme, which covers 75% of the costs of one-to-one and small-group tutoring; and an academic mentors scheme in disadvantaged schools. To get the schemes running quickly, the Department looked first to organisations with whom it had existing relationships to assess whether they had the capacity and capability to lead the schemes, rather than carrying out a competitive procurement exercise. For the tuition partners scheme, it appointed EEF, and for the academic mentors scheme, it appointed Teach First. In February 2021, the Department set out a further £700 million of funding to help children catch up on missed learning and development (paragraphs 3.7 to 3.10 and 3.19, and Figure 8).

23 The National Tutoring Programme schemes may not reach the most disadvantaged children. The Department initially expected the tuition partners scheme to support between 200,000 and 250,000 children. At February 2021, 125,200 children had been allocated a tutoring place across 3,984 schools. Although aimed at disadvantaged children, the Department has not specified what proportion of children accessing the scheme should be disadvantaged (for example, eligible for pupil premium funding). Schools are encouraged to focus on disadvantaged pupils, but are free to use their professional judgement to identify the children who would benefit most. Of the 125,200 children allocated a tutoring place, 41,100 had started to receive tuition, of whom 44% were eligible for pupil premium. This raises questions over the extent to which the scheme will reach the most disadvantaged children. Demand for the academic mentors scheme for disadvantaged schools has outstripped supply. At January 2021, Teach First had received requests for mentors from 1,789 eligible schools. By February 2021, it had placed mentors in 1,100 schools, meaning more than 600 schools that requested a mentor had not received one (paragraphs 3.15 and 3.16, and Figure 8).

Conclusion

24 The COVID-19 pandemic presented the Department with an unprecedented challenge in the form of wholesale disruption to schooling across the country. With no pre-existing plan for dealing with disruption on this scale, the Department's approach was largely reactive. In the early months of the pandemic, it allowed schools considerable discretion in how they supported in-school and remote learning. This helped to reduce the demands on schools at a very difficult time, but also contributed to wide variation in the education and support that children received.

25 The Department took action to support schools and pupils, including ensuring that schools remained open for vulnerable children and funding online resources for those learning at home. Aspects of its response, however, could have been done better or more quickly, and therefore been more effective in mitigating the learning pupils lost as a result of the disruption. For example, it could have set clear expectations for in-school and remote learning earlier and addressed the barriers that disadvantaged children faced more effectively. It is crucial that the Department now takes swift and effective action, including to learn wider lessons from its COVID-19 response, and to ensure that the catch-up learning programme is effective and reaches the children who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, such as those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Recommendations

26 We recommend that the Department should:

a **conduct a full evaluation of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic**, covering both the early stages and the more recent disruption to schooling, including seeking input from schools and other stakeholders;

b **put in place effective monitoring to track the longer-term impact of COVID-19 disruption on all pupils' development and attainment**, with a particular focus on vulnerable and disadvantaged children, and take action in light of the results;

c **work with Ofsted to reintroduce arrangements for obtaining independent assurance about schools' provision**, while recognising the additional pressures that schools are under during the pandemic;

d **act quickly on its early assessments of the catch-up programme during 2020/21**, to ensure that the funding is achieving value for money and the National Tutoring Programme schemes are reaching disadvantaged children as intended; and

e **identify lessons for remote and online learning from innovative practice developed during the pandemic** and take account of these in its programmes to improve the use of educational technology.

Part One

The Department for Education's response to COVID-19 in the school system

1.1 This part of the report covers how the Department for Education (the Department) responded to support the school system during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The school system

1.2 In March 2020, there were almost 21,600 state schools in England, educating 8.2 million pupils aged four to 19. Around 12,500 of these schools (58% of the total), with 3.8 million pupils, were maintained schools, funded and overseen by local authorities. The remaining 9,000 schools (42%) were academies, with 4.4 million pupils. Each academy school is part of an academy trust, directly funded by the Department and independent of the relevant local authority.

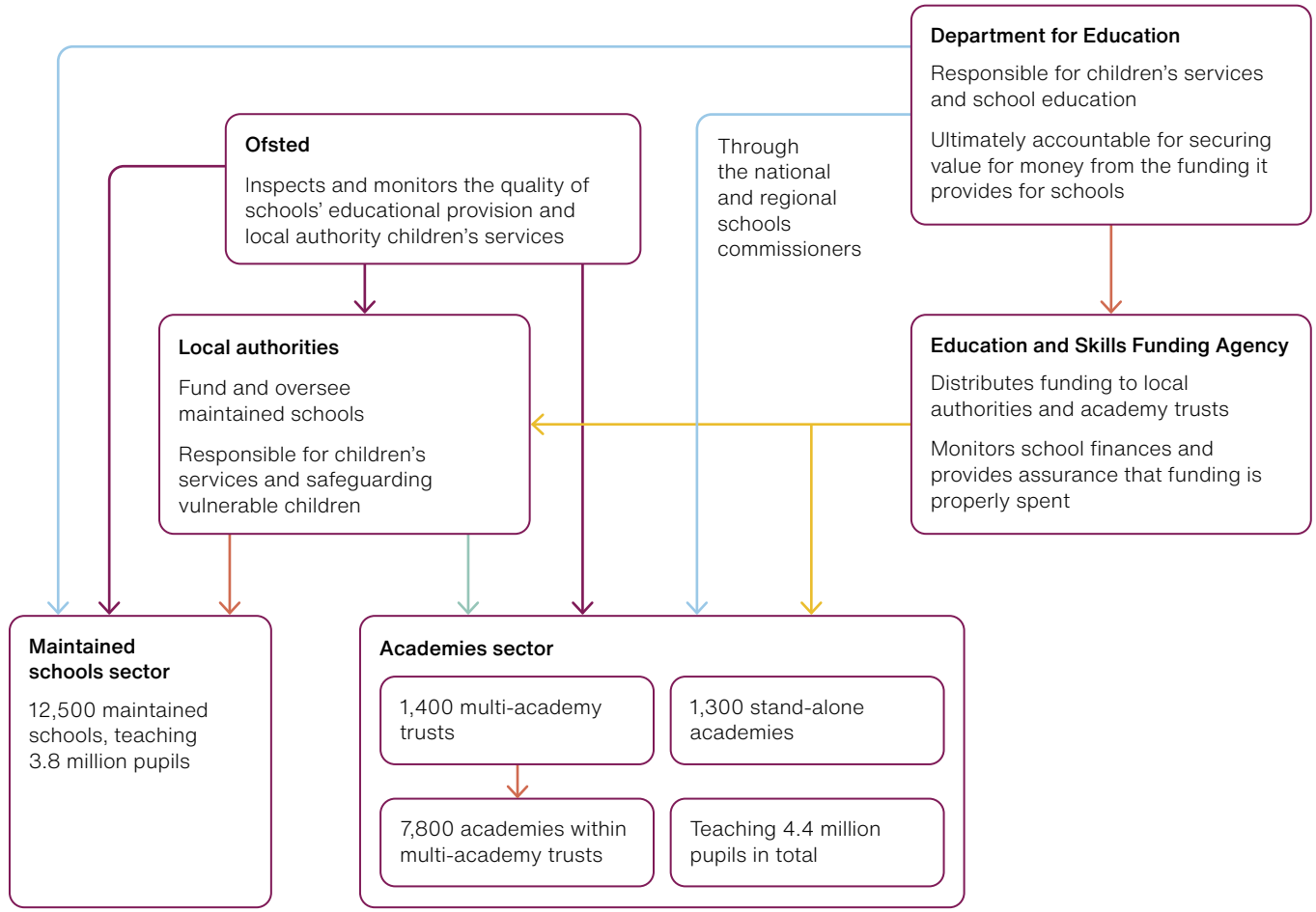
1.3 The Department is responsible for the school system (**Figure 1**), and is ultimately accountable for securing value for money from the funding provided for schools. Its responsibilities include: making sure that local services protect and support children; teaching and learning in schools; supporting professionals who work with children; and helping disadvantaged children and young people achieve more. The Department works with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (the ESFA), which distributes funding for schools and provides assurance about how the money has been used. Ofsted inspects schools and provides independent assurance about their effectiveness, including the quality of education.

Planning for large-scale disruption

1.4 At the start of 2020, the Department had no plan for managing mass disruption to schooling on the scale caused by COVID-19. Its emergency response function was designed to manage localised disruption – for example, in the event of floods – and it had no strategy for how to respond to a pandemic affecting the whole country. In 2016, the Department had taken part in Exercise Cygnus, a cross-government exercise to test how the UK would respond to a serious influenza pandemic. One outcome from the exercise was that the Department drafted legal clauses, which it subsequently used in the Coronavirus Act 2020, to give it powers to direct education providers to close or remain open in the event of a pandemic.

Figure 1

Oversight and accountability arrangements for the school system in England



Notes

1 The numbers of schools and pupils are for state schools, excluding stand-alone nurseries, and are at March 2020.

2 The numbers of schools and academy trusts are rounded to the nearest 100.

3 Pupil numbers are calculated on a full-time equivalent basis.

Source: National Audit Office

1.5 The Department activated its emergency response function in late January. By 10 February, it had established a departmental operations centre to coordinate its response to the pandemic, modelled on a similar function set up to prepare for the UK's exit from the European Union. The centre was based within the operations directorate, with the chief operating officer as the senior responsible owner for the Department's COVID-19 response. The centre's staff grew from five in mid-February to 50 by the end of March.

1.6 In the early stages of the pandemic, the Department's leadership team had daily calls and received formal weekly updates on the COVID-19 response. From 12 May, the Department established a weekly COVID-19 Board attended by the Permanent Secretary. In June, it replaced the departmental operations centre with the COVID-19 response unit, which was directly accountable to the Permanent Secretary.

1.7 On 18 March, the Secretary of State announced that, to help limit transmission of COVID-19, schools would close from 23 March to all pupils except vulnerable children and children of critical workers. Schools partially re-opened on 1 June, to children in reception classes and years 1 and 6. In mid-June, schools began providing face-to-face support to students in years 10 and 12 to supplement their remote learning. But most children learnt remotely throughout the period and did not return to school until the new academic year began in September.

1.8 Without an established plan, the Department's response to the pandemic was largely reactive, responding to events as they unfolded. It prioritised continuing to fund schools and other education providers, and communicating with the sectors it oversees. From April, the Department prepared COVID-19 response plans for its support for schools and vulnerable children, including high-level milestones, risks and dependencies. However, it was not until the end of June that it began to formulate a single overarching plan that set out objectives, milestones and risks at a departmental level. The Department recognises that the lack of such a plan up to this point posed a risk to clear communication, coordination and prioritisation.

1.9 The Department has adjusted its approach to supporting children's education as the pandemic progressed. However, at the time of our work, the Department had not carried out a systematic exercise to evaluate its response during the early stages of the pandemic and identify lessons for potential future disruption to schooling. In May 2020, it began considering the potential long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the school system, but this did not cover how it might improve its emergency preparedness and future response.

The Department's powers

1.10 The school system is devolved, with power resting at local level, and the Department does not control schools. It exercises its oversight through a mix of legal powers, funding rules, guidelines and influencing. The Department told us that, in the early stages of its COVID-19 response, it chose to leave schools free to make their own decisions about in-school and remote learning provision. However, it became more directive and introduced additional legal powers as the pandemic progressed.

1.11 Early in 2020, the Department was unsure whether it would be able to persuade schools to close if that became necessary. However, it believed that its direct funding of academy trusts might give it more leverage over academies than maintained schools. The Department was also concerned that the Coronavirus Act 2020 might not be in place in time to compel schools to close. In the event, schools closed to most children voluntarily from 23 March and the Department did not use the powers in the act, which took effect on 25 March.

1.12 Between March and July, the Department chose not to mandate requirements for educational provision, but to offer guidance and support to schools, in recognition of the challenges that schools were facing, including staff shortages. In guidance published in July, which focused on schools re-opening in September, the Department emphasised that it expected pupils learning at home to have access to high-quality online and offline resources linked to the school's normal curriculum.

1.13 The Department decided that, for 2020/21, it needed to make clearer schools' responsibility to provide remote learning, given the risk of continued disruption to normal schooling. It therefore placed a legal duty on schools, under the Coronavirus Act 2020, which came into force on 22 October. Where a class, group or individual pupil need to self-isolate, or where local or national restrictions require pupils to remain at home, schools are now expected to provide immediate access to remote education. Some stakeholders have criticised this change, believing it shows a lack of trust in the teaching profession.

1.14 The Department also acted to remove temporarily certain requirements and allow schools and local authorities to focus on dealing with the impact of the pandemic. For example:

- On 17 March, the Secretary of State announced that Ofsted would suspend routine inspections, to help schools focus on their core functions. In autumn 2020, Ofsted began visiting schools to look at how they were supporting pupils on their return, but at the time of our work routine inspections remained suspended. In late January 2021, Ofsted began additional monitoring inspections of schools previously graded as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'. Throughout the pandemic, Ofsted continued with inspections in response to specific issues, including safeguarding and other serious concerns.
- In April, the Department made changes to the school admissions appeals regulations, to provide extra flexibilities on the format and timescales for appeals. It also paused or cancelled some data collections, such as the summer school census, to reduce the burden on the sector.
- On 1 May, some aspects of the law on education, health and care (EHC) needs assessments and plans were changed temporarily to give local authorities, health commissioning bodies, education providers and other bodies more flexibility.[2] As a result, between 1 May and 31 July, local authorities and health commissioners were required to use only their "reasonable endeavours" to secure or arrange the provision in an EHC plan. Separate changes, applicable between 1 May and 25 September, removed the requirement for local authorities (or other bodies involved) to complete a child's needs assessment and EHC planning processes within a fixed timeframe if this was delayed because of COVID-19, and replaced it with an obligation to complete the actions "as soon as reasonably practicable" (or similar).

While these steps helped schools and local authorities at a time of crisis, they inevitably had some negative effects. The suspension of inspections reduced the level of independent assurance about schools' effectiveness, although Ofsted was able to carry out visits to schools from the start of the 2020 autumn term. The Office of the Children's Commissioner told us that some children with special educational needs and disabilities experienced delays in assessments, and did not receive the support that they would expect in normal times.

2 At January 2020, 271,700 pupils (21.5% of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities) at state schools had legally enforceable entitlements to specific packages of support, set out in EHC plans.

Funding

1.15 The ESFA continued to pay core funding to schools throughout the pandemic. For 2020-21, the Department's budget to support schools' core activities totalled £47.6 billion.

1.16 In early April, the Department told schools that it would pay for specific exceptional costs arising from COVID-19. It did this by reprioritising funds from other departmental budgets. The Department made funding available only to schools that could not meet additional COVID-19 costs from existing resources, or could do so only by drawing on reserves and undermining their long-term financial sustainability. The amount that schools could claim was limited according to the size of the school.[3]

1.17 By the end of January 2021, around 72% of schools had submitted claims for exceptional costs, totalling £181 million (**Figure 2** overleaf). At this point, the Department had reimbursed, or intended to reimburse, schools for £133 million of claims (73%). The Department initially estimated that exceptional funding would amount to just under £130 million across three categories:

- providing free school meals, before the start of the national voucher scheme or where schools made local arrangements to support eligible children;
- costs of opening school premises during the Easter and summer half-term holidays; and
- additional cleaning costs due to COVID-19 outbreaks.

1.18 Schools also made £42 million of claims outside these categories, including for costs relating to: personal protective equipment; cleaning and social distancing; technology and other materials for children's home learning and staff working from home; and additional staff. The Department did not reimburse schools for any of these other claims relating to the 2019/20 summer term. However, it later agreed to help meet schools' additional staffing costs in the second half of the 2020/21 autumn term through a separate COVID-19 workforce fund.

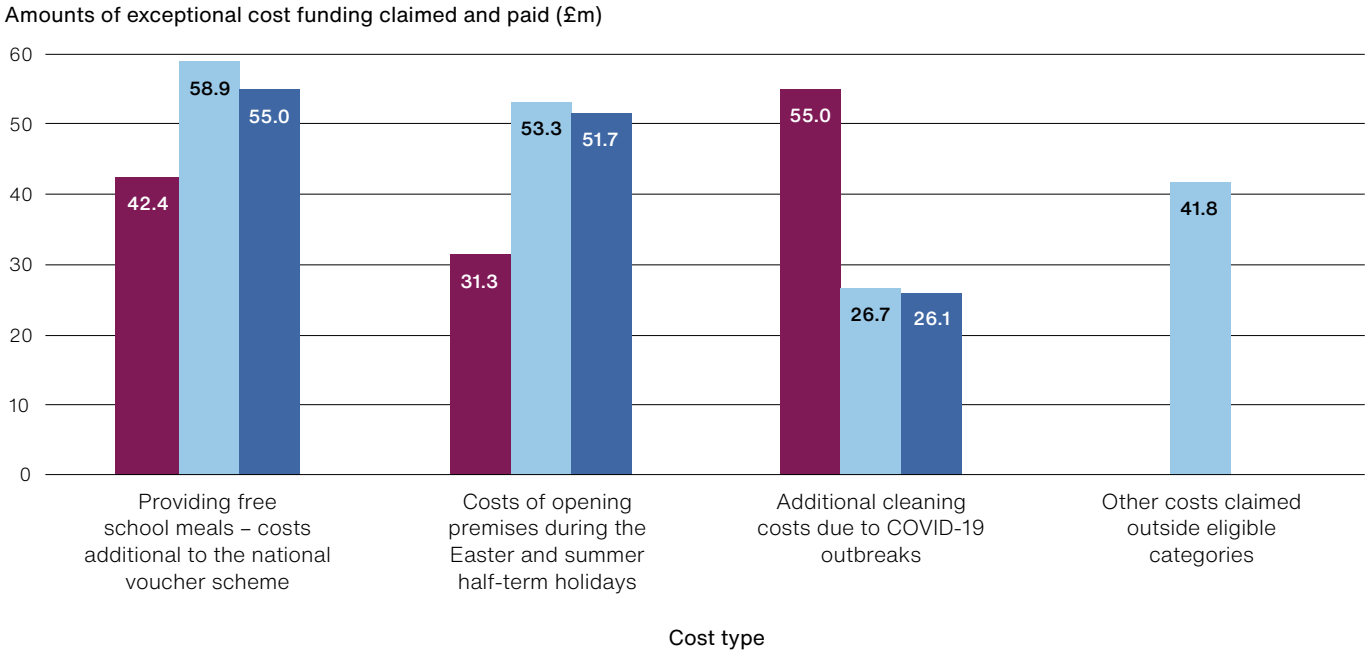
1.19 A report by the Education Policy Institute in December 2020 estimated that the Department's additional funding met less than one-third (31%) of the costs incurred by schools as a result of the pandemic from March to November 2020.[4] This estimate included costs that schools did not claim.

3 The limits ranged from £25,000 for schools of 250 pupils or fewer, to £75,000 for schools of more than 1,000 pupils.
4 Education Policy Institute, *Assessing Covid-19 cost pressures on England's schools*, December 2020. Based on responses from more than 700 schools.

Figure 2

Department for Education funding for schools' COVID-19 exceptional costs between March and July 2020 in England

The Department for Education (the Department) paid schools for most claims within its three eligible categories, but for no other claims



Notes

1 This Figure shows the costs schools had claimed and the Department had paid or agreed to pay, at January 2021.

2 Excludes payments for free school meals provision over the school summer holiday.

Source: Department for Education data

Coordinating with other parts of government

1.20 The pandemic prompted the Department to set up new arrangements to coordinate better with other oversight bodies. In early April, it established nine regional education and children's teams (REACT). The teams comprised departmental officials, including from the regional schools commissioners' teams, and staff from Ofsted and the ESFA. The REACT teams focused on vulnerable children, and met at least weekly to share intelligence, focus support on those local authorities in greatest need, and streamline communication with local authorities. They also worked with schools to address barriers to re-opening in June, and to identify examples of good practice to share. The Association of Directors of Children's Services told us the REACT teams provided a helpful mechanism for communication to flow from the sector to local departmental leads. They also said that the teams had not yet been used to their full potential and suggested they take a more forward-looking approach to support recovery after the pandemic.

1.21 Since April, the Department has led a cross-government response to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable children and young people.[5] This focuses on these children's attendance, attainment, safeguarding and well-being, and involves input and representation from a range of government departments.

Engaging with the school system

1.22 The Department engaged with the school system throughout the early stages of the pandemic, to update stakeholders on developments, obtain expert input and consult on guidance. It used existing teacher and headteacher reference groups to involve school staff in policy development and implementation. From April, the Department increased its stakeholder engagement, with a COVID-19 recovery advisory group, made up of academy trust leaders and others, meeting weekly. A wider stakeholder advisory group, made up of teaching unions and sector stakeholders with ministerial involvement, was convened in June and met fortnightly. The views we gathered from representative bodies about the quality of the Department's engagement were mixed. Some told us that, where the Department reached out to them, they appreciated its efforts, while others commented that communication was rushed or came too late.

5 The cross-government response focused on children assessed as in need under the Children Act 1989 (for example, children with a child protection plan or looked-after children) and children with an EHC plan, as well as children assessed as 'otherwise vulnerable' at local level.

1.23 The timeliness and volume of departmental guidance caused difficulties for schools. The Department published many guidance documents and often updated them as government developed its response to the evolving pandemic. For example, it calculated that, between mid-March and 28 April, it published more than 150 new documents and updates to existing material. The representative bodies we consulted told us that guidance was often published at the end of the week or late in the evening, which put schools under pressure, especially when guidance was for immediate implementation. The Department recognises that schools had to respond to changing guidance at short notice during the summer term; it issued guidance for the autumn re-opening of schools on 2 July with the aim of giving schools enough time to put plans in place.

1.24 Stakeholders said that, when the Department updated guidance, schools were not always clear what changes it had made. From mid-May, the Department acted to address this issue by including a summary at the start of amended guidance to indicate which sections had been updated. An informal survey of its members conducted by the Chartered College of Teaching in October 2020 found that 67% of respondents thought the Department's guidance on remote learning was unhelpful or very unhelpful, while the figure for in-school learning was 58%.[6]

1.25 Information requests to the Department's coronavirus helpline and email inbox peaked in the weeks leading up to the closure of schools to most children, and the Department initially struggled to cope with the volume of enquiries:

- In the week beginning 16 March, there were 17,900 weekday calls in total, an average of almost 3,600 per day. Callers abandoned 55% of calls and the average waiting time for the remaining calls to be answered was more than 35 minutes.
- From 23 March, the Department increased the number of advisers from around 90 to 300. The average waiting time dropped to less than five seconds, and practically all calls were answered.
- The number of calls and emails that were answered, and for which details were recorded, peaked at 2,900 per week for schools in the week beginning 9 March and 3,750 for parents in the week beginning 16 March.[7] The average number of calls and emails dropped to 600 per week for schools and 750 per week for parents from 1 June to 17 July.
- The most common subjects raised by schools and parents were disease control and free school meals. Staff answering calls directed 88% of calls from schools, and 79% from parents, to existing advice.

6 Unpublished survey conducted by the Chartered College of Teaching in October 2020. The number of respondents was 618.

7 The Department did not record details for all calls that were answered, particularly in March. For the week beginning 16 March, details were not recorded for 30% of calls (2,600). This proportion dropped to less than 5% by mid-April. The method used to record organisation type means that the figures for schools include some calls and emails from nurseries and other childcare providers. Figures for calls from parents are for all educational institutions.

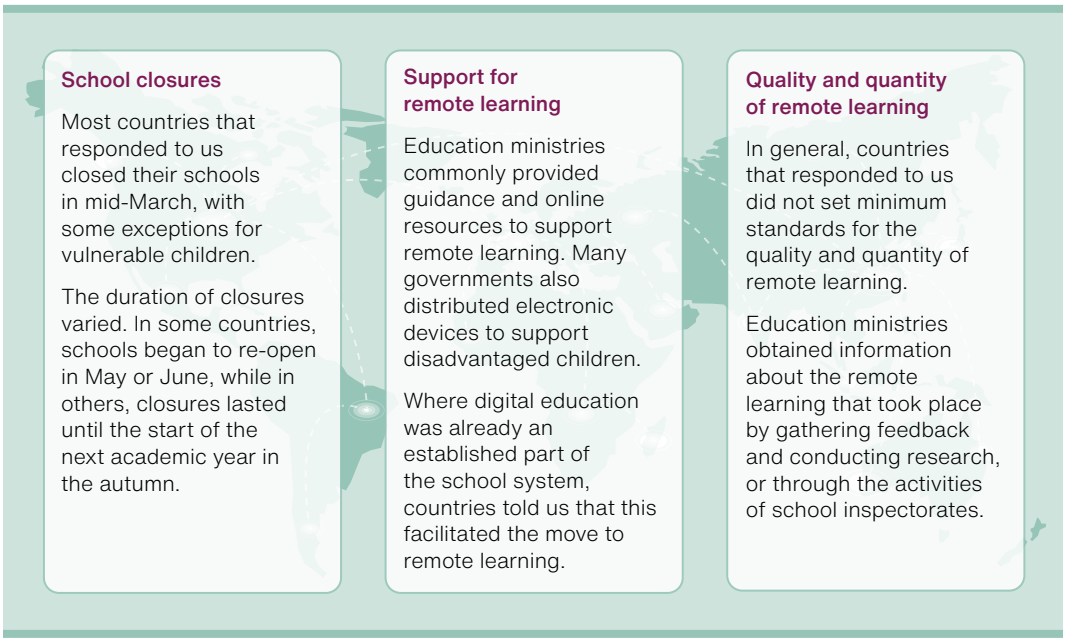
International comparisons

1.26 The Department monitored the response to the pandemic in other countries to inform its approach. It compared policies on issues such as school re-opening, remote learning, and hygiene and safety measures in schools. These comparisons drew on the Foreign & Commonwealth Office's weekly surveys to British embassies and high commissions, in which the Department was able to include questions. The Department also used information gathered from its international contacts, as well as publicly available material.

1.27 We gathered information from audit institutions in other countries to compare how governments responded to the pandemic. We found that most countries were largely unprepared for widespread disruption to schooling, and they generally adopted similar approaches to the Department (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3

How other countries supported education during the early stages of the pandemic



Note

1 Based on responses from 24 countries, mainly from across Europe (21), as well as Asia (1) and Australasia (2).

Source: National Audit Office data collection from other supreme audit institutions

Part Two

Support for children's learning

2.1 This part of the report covers how the Department for Education (the Department) supported children's learning, both in school and remotely, during the early months of the pandemic between March and July 2020.

2.2 The pandemic posed major challenges for the school workforce, who had to adapt to new ways of working and continue educating pupils in stressful and uncertain circumstances. It also meant that schools had fewer staff available – some staff contracted the virus while others had to shield at home as they were deemed to be extremely clinically vulnerable. A survey by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in May 2020 found that, on average, schools were operating at 75% of their normal teaching capacity, and that 24% of senior leaders found their working hours mostly or completely unmanageable.[8] Teaching unions told us that the well-being of the profession had been damaged by the pandemic.

Learning in school

Attendance

Vulnerable children

2.3 At the outset of the pandemic, the Department prioritised the needs of vulnerable children. It viewed continued school attendance as an important way of safeguarding and supporting these children. The following groups were eligible to remain in school throughout the period, alongside the children of critical workers:

- Children assessed as being in need under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 (for example, those with a child in need plan or a child protection plan, and looked-after children). At 31 March 2020, there were 300,900 children aged five or over in this group.

8 Walker, M., Sharp, C. and Sims, D. (2020). *Schools' responses to Covid-19: Job satisfaction and workload of teachers and senior leaders.* Slough: NFER. Based on the findings of a national survey of more than 3,000 school leaders and teachers in mainstream schools in England.

- Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who had an education, health and care (EHC) plan and whom a risk assessment had determined would be at least as safe in school as at home. At January 2020, there were 271,700 state school pupils with an EHC plan. However, the Department expected only a minority of them to continue attending school, with the needs of the majority being safely met at home.
- Children assessed as otherwise vulnerable by schools or local authorities.

Organisations including the Office of the Children's Commissioner and the Association of Directors of Children's Services told us that they welcomed the Department's decision to keep schools open for vulnerable children.

2.4 The Department estimates that, between 23 March and the end of May when institutions could open only to eligible pupils, around 80% of schools and colleges remained open. Where schools did not open, the Department expected them to work with their local authority to find alternative arrangements for their pupils who were eligible to continue attending school during this period.

2.5 A small, but increasing, minority of vulnerable children attended school between 23 March and the end of the summer term. The proportion of children defined as in need under the Children Act 1989, or with an EHC plan, who attended school or college remained below 11% from 23 March to late May.[9] Attendance increased gradually after schools partially re-opened in June and reached a weekly average of 26% by the end of the summer term (**Figure 4** overleaf).[10]

2.6 Attendance was not compulsory, and a review by the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit in June found that some schools and local authorities prioritised attendance for all vulnerable pupils, while others encouraged attendance only where they considered that children's safeguarding or other needs could not be met at home. This was despite the Department's guidance stating that children assessed as being in need under the Children Act 1989 were expected to attend school unless the child or household was shielding or clinically vulnerable.

2.7 The Prime Minister's Implementation Unit also identified that parents may have been reluctant to send their children to school because of concerns about the health of their children or other family members. We heard from bodies representing children with SEND that the quality of the risk assessment process to determine if a child with SEND would be safe to attend school varied. In some instances, schools and health and social care professionals worked collaboratively with families to support children. In other cases, risk assessments were not carried out or carried out without consultation with parents.

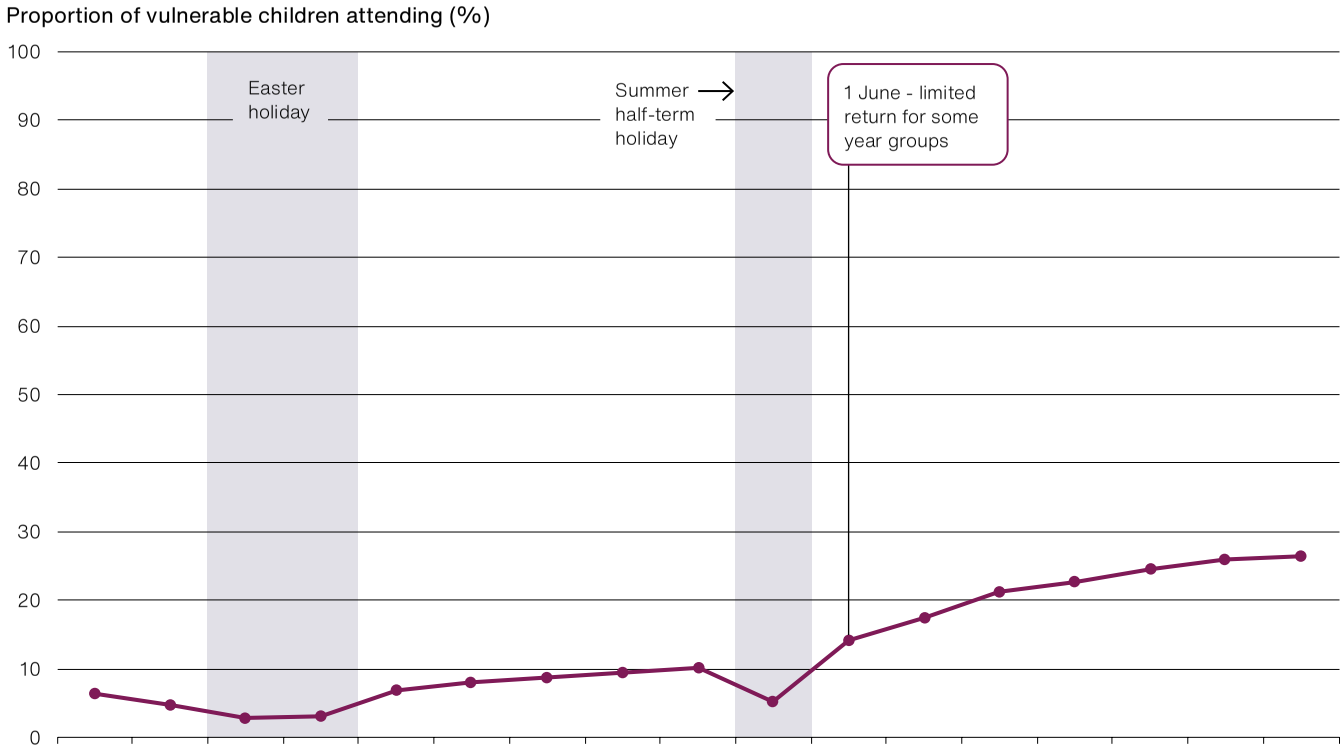
9 The way that the Department organises its attendance data meant that figures for schools only could not be extracted.

10 These figures do not include children defined as 'otherwise vulnerable', as schools and local authorities identified this group locally and therefore there is no consistent definition to use at national level.

Figure 4

Proportion of vulnerable children who attended school or college in England, March to July 2020

Attendance rates generally rose over the period, but only around one-quarter of vulnerable children were in school or college by the end of the summer term



	23 Mar	30 Mar	6 Apr	13 Apr	20 Apr	27 Apr	4 May	11 May	18 May	25 May	1 Jun	8 Jun	15 Jun	22 Jun	29 Jun	6 Jul	13 Jul
Proportion of vulnerable children attending (%)	6.4	4.8	2.8	3.2	6.8	8.0	8.8	9.6	10.2	5.2	14.2	17.4	21.2	22.6	24.6	26.0	26.4

Notes

1 This Figure shows the average proportion of children defined as in need under the Children Act 1989, or with an education, health and care plan, attending school or college each week. It does not include children assessed as 'otherwise vulnerable'.

2 Attendance data cover state and independent schools, and sixth-form and further education colleges.

Source: Department for Education data: *Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak*

2.8 The Department's aim during this period was to increase the proportion of vulnerable children going to school, by strengthening communications and guidance on the benefits of attendance and providing support to local authorities via its regional education and children's teams. The Department and Ofsted were concerned that low school attendance could result in increased levels of hidden harm. A departmental survey of local authorities found there were 82,890 referrals to children's social care services during the weeks surveyed between 27 April and 16 August, around 15% less than the average for the same period over the previous three years. Referrals remained generally lower than usual between September and early November.

2.9 The Department took action to reduce the risks to vulnerable children who were not attending school, including prioritising the access of children with social workers and care leavers to IT equipment as a way for them to remain in contact with school and access online social care services (paragraph 2.18). It also provided funding for charities working with vulnerable children.

Other children

2.10 Schools also remained open for the children of critical workers, although most did not attend. To help limit the spread of COVID-19, the Department initially recommended that these children remain at home if they could be safely cared for. Its guidance changed on 11 May as transmission rates fell, and critical workers were encouraged to send their children to school. A small minority of critical workers' children went to school during the period: daily term-time attendance averaged around 4% of the estimated population between 23 March and 22 May, and increased to an average of around 13% after schools partially re-opened on 1 June.

2.11 On average, only 2% of all children attended school daily during term time between 23 March and 22 May. The proportion increased to 13% after schools partially re-opened in June. The Department did not collect data on the attendance of disadvantaged children specifically (such as those from low-income families eligible for pupil premium), so it is impossible to assess whether they were more or less likely to attend school than their peers.

Variation in schools' provision of in-school learning

2.12 The nature of provision for children attending school during this period differed from what pupils normally received. The Department advised schools to put in place protective measures including: reducing class sizes; altering start and break times; reorganising classroom layouts; and minimising the sharing of resources. It also told schools they were free to determine the type of provision they offered, but they should consider factors such as the children's mental health and well-being, and specific learning needs.

2.13 The learning that children experienced in school varied considerably. Slightly less than half of schools surveyed by NFER in May 2020 reported teaching those pupils attending school the same curriculum content as was being sent to those learning remotely.[11] A sizeable minority of schools provided extra-curricular activities, such as arts, crafts or games, as their main approach to in-school provision. NFER's research found:

- 29% of primary school leaders reported their main approach was extra-curricular activities, compared with 7% of secondary schools (**Figure 5**); and
- leaders in the most deprived schools (37%) were twice as likely to report their main approach was providing extra-curricular activities as those in the least deprived schools (17%).

Learning remotely

2.14 The Department started to publish guidance for parents, carers and teachers about remote learning on 19 April, a month after schools closed to most children. The material signposted online resources, provided safeguarding information for working remotely, and outlined plans to provide IT equipment. In May, the Department supplemented this material with guidance and case studies on adapting teaching practice for remote education. At this point, the Department said that schools should seek to support pupils both at school and at home, but emphasised there would be no penalty for schools unable to provide a broad and balanced curriculum. A number of the bodies we consulted were critical of the Department's guidance on remote learning, saying that it was lacking or unhelpful, or issued too late.

Digital resources

2.15 In May, the Department provided £500,000 to help fund Oak National Academy, with the aim of filling gaps in remote learning provision and reducing the extent to which disadvantaged children fell behind their peers while schools were closed to most pupils. Oak National Academy was developed by staff from a range of education organisations and is owned by Reach Foundation, which received the funding.

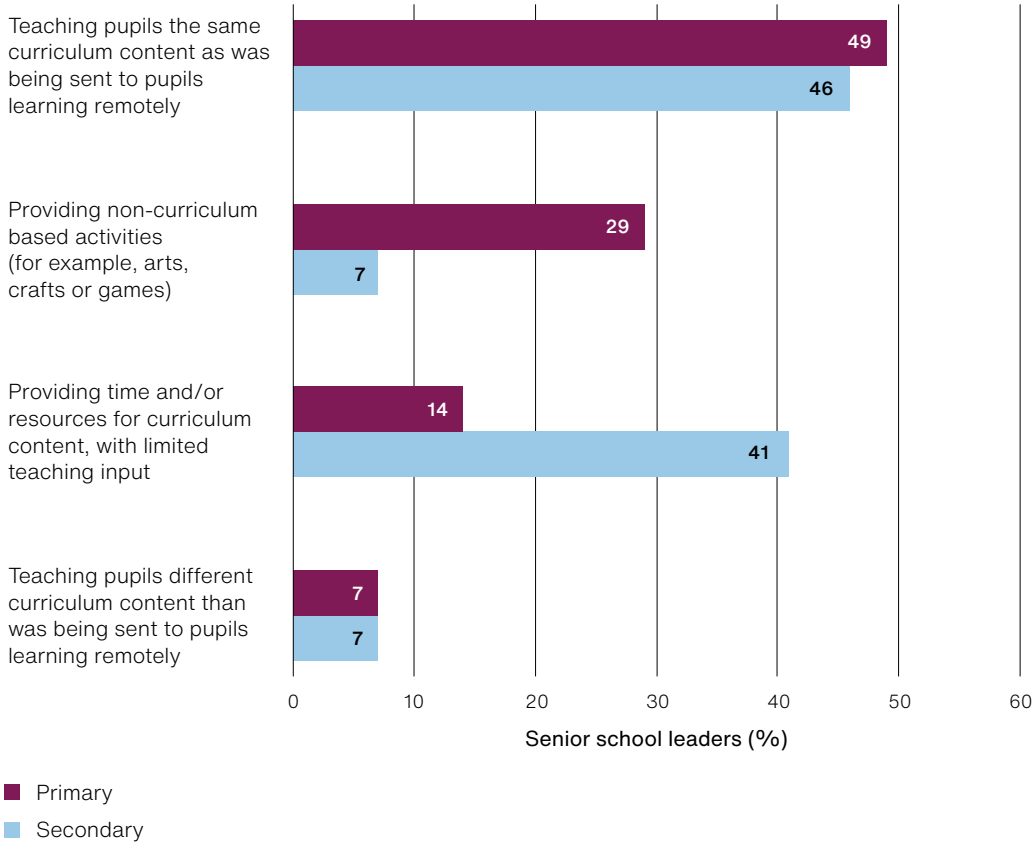
2.16 Oak National Academy offers video lessons and other online resources to schools and pupils. It provides an additional option for remote learning, alongside other content providers such as the BBC. In June, the Department agreed to provide a further £4.34 million so that the material on offer could be expanded for 2020/21 to cover the full curriculum.

11 Julius, J. and Sims, D. (2020). *Schools' responses to Covid-19: Support for vulnerable pupils and the children of keyworkers*. Slough: NFER. Based on findings from a national survey of 1,233 senior leaders and 1,821 teachers in publicly funded, mainstream primary and secondary schools in England.

Figure 5

Schools' main approach to supporting the learning of vulnerable pupils and the children of critical workers in school in England, as reported by senior school leaders in May 2020

Twenty-nine per cent of primary schools used non-curriculum based activities as their main approach to supporting children's learning, compared with 7% of secondary schools



Notes

1 This Figure is based on a survey of 1,233 senior school leaders in May 2020, of whom 995 gave a response.

2 Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Julius, J. and Sims, D. (2020). *Schools' responses to Covid-19: Support for vulnerable pupils and the children of keyworkers*. Slough: NFER

2.17 According to Oak National Academy's data, on average 220,000 people used its website daily from launch on 20 April to 12 July, mainly to access content for primary school pupils (84% of users). Three-quarters of users visited the website more than once, and the completion rate for lessons grew from 49% to 64% over the summer term. In a survey commissioned by Oak National Academy, 33% of teachers responding said the main reason they used the website was to help them manage their workload, with 27% citing the "increased quality of teaching and learning" they could offer.[12] Stakeholder groups we consulted felt Oak National Academy was a helpful, high-quality resource.

IT equipment and internet access

2.18 The Department targeted the provision of IT equipment towards children most in need of support. It recognised that the ability of vulnerable and disadvantaged children to learn remotely and access online social care services was likely to be hampered by a lack of suitable devices and internet access. The Department did not aim to provide equipment to all children who lacked it. In early April, it considered providing laptops or tablets, and 4G routers (with paid-for internet access), for vulnerable children and those in all 'priority groups' who did not have access.[13] This would have involved providing 602,000 laptops or tablets and 100,000 routers in total. The Department decided to reduce this number due to the practical difficulty of supplying devices on this scale. It ultimately sought to provide equipment to all children with a social worker and care leavers, and disadvantaged pupils in year 10 only.

2.19 The Department estimated it would need 220,000 laptops or tablets and 50,000 routers, for children with a social worker and care leavers, and disadvantaged children in year 10. It concluded that a competitive procurement exercise would take too long in a global market of high demand and limited supply. The Department procured Computacenter (UK) Limited to deliver: the laptops and tablets, through a direct award under an existing Crown Commercial Service framework for technology products and associated services; and the routers, through a direct award outside the framework but using the same terms and conditions. The Department took assurance about Computacenter's capacity and capability to deliver from ICT industry representatives.

12 Oak National Academy, *End of Term Report: Insights and Reflections from Oak's First Term*. Based on surveys of teachers and school leaders in May 2020 (387 respondents, all users), in June to July 2020 (982 respondents, users and non-users) and in June 2020 (681 respondents, all users). Also based on one-to-one interviews and small focus groups involving 29 schools and 15 parents.

13 The Department defined 'priority groups' as pupils approaching exams, and those at a critical development age or in a transition year – that is, children in reception and years 1, 2, 5, 6 and 10 to 13.

2.20 The contract for the laptops and tablets, awarded on 19 April, was worth £70.4 million in the summer term, while the contract for the routers, awarded on 7 May, was worth £6.4 million. In total, including software, configuration and VAT, the Department spent £95.5 million on laptops, tablets and routers in the summer term.

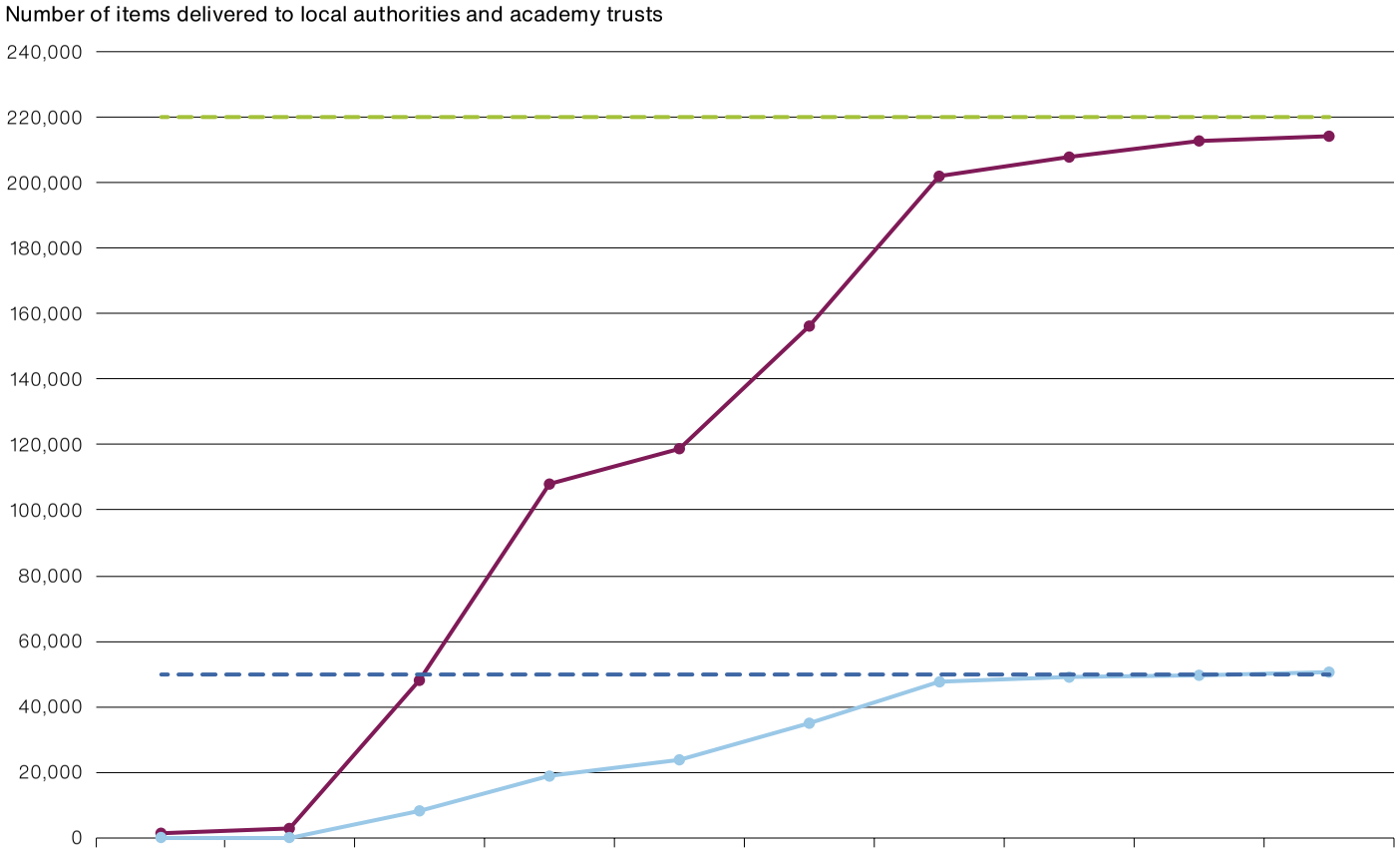
2.21 Substantial amounts of equipment did not reach local authorities and academy trusts until June, meaning that many children may not have been able to access remote learning until well into the second half of the summer term. The Department prioritised delivery to local authorities rather than academy trusts, because that enabled children with social workers and care leavers to receive the equipment first. Most of the equipment was sourced from overseas and the Department received an initial 50,200 laptops and tablets by 11 May, when local authorities were invited to place their first orders. The Department distributed the first 1,200 laptops and tablets to local authorities by 18 May. It delivered 48,200 by 1 June and 202,200 by the end of June. By the last full week of term, starting on 13 July, the Department had delivered 212,900 laptops and tablets, and 49,700 routers (**Figure 6** overleaf).

2.22 The Department continued to distribute laptops, tablets and routers during the 2020/21 academic year. It focused provision on disadvantaged children affected by disruption to face-to-face teaching at school, or who had been advised to shield for medical reasons. By December, the Department had provided an extra 349,500 laptops and tablets, and 4,900 routers, in addition to those delivered in the 2019/20 summer term, bringing the total to almost 617,000 items. Research carried out for the Department early in 2021 found that, during 2020, the UK had delivered considerably more equipment than any of the other 19 European countries examined.

Figure 6

Number of laptops and tablets, and 4G routers, delivered to local authorities and academy trusts in England, May to July 2020

The Department for Education did not start delivering significant numbers of items until late May, and approached full delivery towards the end of the summer term



	18 May	25 May	1 June	8 June	15 June	22 June	29 June	6 July	13 July	20 July
Laptops and tablets delivered	1,187	2,600	48,175	108,114	118,783	156,047	202,212	207,785	212,926	214,500
4G routers delivered	0	0	8,163	18,857	23,475	35,052	47,416	48,982	49,683	50,316

Full delivery of laptops and tablets – 220,000

Full delivery of 4G routers – 50,000

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Education data

2.23 The Department recognised that internet access, and the cost of it, could also be a barrier to remote learning. In addition to providing 50,000 routers, it trialled three schemes, with varying degrees of success, to provide enhanced internet access to children learning at home:

- **Wi-Fi hotspots**: On 15 June, the Department started a pilot scheme for the use of Wi-Fi hotspots by children without internet access at home.[14] It distributed 10,000 vouchers, donated by a mobile network operator, that offered free access to Wi-Fi hotspots. However, very few of the vouchers were activated, and the Department's small-scale research found users were often unable to connect to the internet or found the connection unreliable. In September, the Department decided to stop the scheme.

- **Zero-rating**: The Department spoke to mobile network operators about 'zero-rating' certain educational websites, so users would not incur data charges when using them. However, large amounts of content on some of these websites are hosted through third-party commercially-run online platforms, so the Department concluded that zero-rating was not a feasible option. Ultimately, only two websites were zero-rated in the summer term: Edenred's website for the free school meals voucher scheme; and Hungry Little Minds, which offers activities for children up to the age of five.

- **Mobile data**: During a pilot scheme, certain mobile network operators agreed to provide extra data to existing customers at no additional cost. The Department found this was an effective way of boosting internet access because users could use their existing devices. Following the success of the pilot, the Department decided to apply the scheme more widely and, at January 2021, 10 mobile network operators had signed up.

2.24 The move to remote learning during the pandemic accelerated the roll-out of digital infrastructure in schools. The Department made funding and technical support available to help schools set up one of two free-to-use digital education platforms. These platforms are designed specifically for remote learning and allow teachers to perform various tasks online, such as delivering video lessons, setting work and providing feedback. At 1 February 2021, 7,100 schools had applied for a grant to help set up a digital education platform, and the Department had provided £4.8 million of funding.

14 Wi-Fi hotspots are physical locations that allow local internet access.

Variation in schools' provision of remote learning

2.25 Children had contrasting experiences in terms of the learning resources schools provided and the level of contact they maintained. Our qualitative evidence suggests that some parents were impressed with the quality of work supplied, and felt that schools offered support whenever needed. However, other parents considered that schools did not provide enough support and guidance, and did not fully appreciate the problems arising when a whole family needed internet access at the same time. A survey by Parentkind in summer 2020 found that: 22% of parents were satisfied with the number of live online lessons provided by the school, while 50% were dissatisfied; and 38% were satisfied with the frequency of check-ins with parents, while 45% were dissatisfied.[15]

2.26 Resources that pupils accessed at a time of their choosing, rather than live online lessons, made up a significant part of schools' provision. A report by NFER noted that just over half of pupils taught remotely in late April did not usually have any live or real-time lessons.[16] By contrast, 92% received some 'offline' provision such as worksheets or recorded videos. NFER also found that 42% of primary pupils, and 54% of secondary pupils, received at least three offline lessons a day. NFER suggested that limited pupil access to IT at home was one of the main reasons why schools used offline methods.

2.27 A survey by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (the IFS) indicated that, at secondary level, the type of school-led provision varied by economic status.[17] It found that:

- 82% of secondary pupils in private schools had received active help (such as online classes, or video and text chat), with 79% receiving online classes; and
- 64% of secondary pupils in state schools from the richest one-fifth of households were offered some form of active help, compared with 47% from the poorest one-fifth.

The IFS stated that these variations in part reflected schools' different capabilities. But it also suggested that schools in more deprived areas might be holding back from adopting online activities to limit the impact of unequal digital access within their pupil population.

15 Parentkind is a membership organisation for parent-teacher associations. Its survey ran from 29 June to 13 July 2020. It generated responses from 3,629 parents in England, 937 in Wales and 298 in Northern Ireland.

16 Eivers, E., Worth, J. and Ghosh, A. (2020). *Home learning during Covid-19: findings from the Understanding Society longitudinal study.* Slough: NFER. Based on responses from the parents of more than 4,000 school-aged children in the UK.

17 Institute for Fiscal Studies, *Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning*, May 2020. Based on an online survey completed by more than 4,000 parents of children aged four to 15 in England between 29 April and 12 May 2020.

Children's engagement with remote learning

2.28 Ofsted has highlighted that, when schools set remote work, many children did not do it or did little. There could have been many reasons for this, including: the challenge of self-study compared with being taught; lack of motivation; limited parental support, often because parents had competing demands from other children, jobs and wider family responsibilities; shortage of IT equipment or a quiet space to work; or the additional difficulties faced by children with SEND or limited English. The Children's Commissioner has emphasised that barriers to home learning are deeply engrained, and that online teaching resources were not sufficient to overcome these challenges.

2.29 There is no consistent evidence about how long children spent on remote learning. For example:

- a study by the IFS found that primary and secondary pupils were each spending about five hours a day on remote learning on average;[18]
- the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that the average time spent on remote learning rose significantly as the age of the child increased, and that children aged five to 10 years spent much less time when there was a child aged zero to four years in the household;[19] and
- survey evidence held by the Department indicated that most teachers felt their pupils were doing less than two hours' work per day.[20]

2.30 Disadvantaged children are likely to have faced particular challenges in engaging with remote learning. The IFS found that children from disadvantaged families had less access to study space and IT equipment, and the activities they did were less likely to benefit their educational attainment. It concluded that children from higher-income families spent around 30% more time on remote learning than children from lower-income families. The IFS projected that, if normal schooling did not return until September and these rates of remote learning continued, the gap would represent 15 full school days.

2.31 Representative groups told us that remote learning had been especially difficult for children with SEND. Many children with complex needs struggled because they did not have at home the IT and other specialist equipment they would normally use at school.

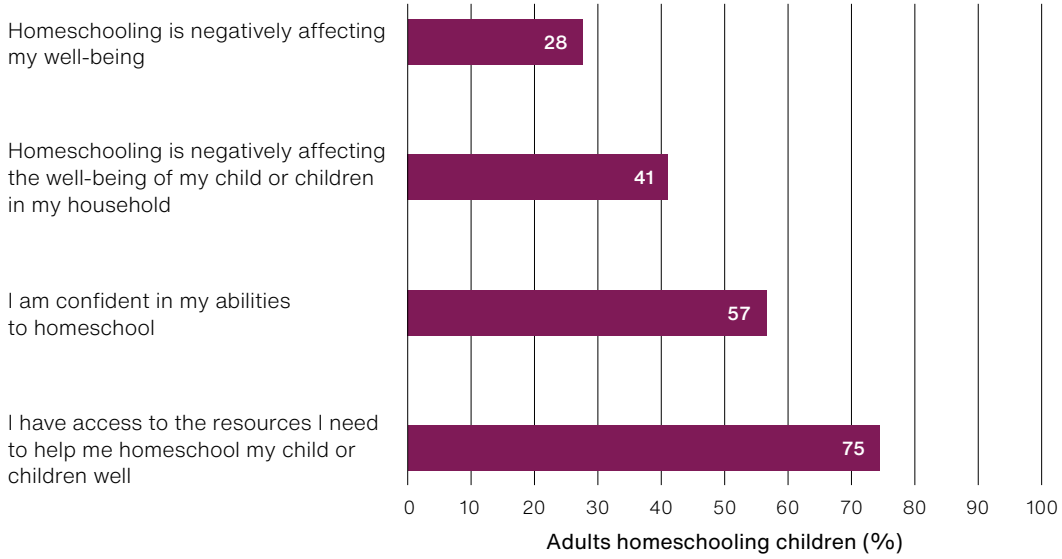
18 See footnote 17.
19 Office for National Statistics, *Coronavirus and homeschooling in Great Britain: April to June 2020*, July 2020. Based on weekly samples of over 2,000 households between 3 April and 7 June 2020.
20 The surveys were undertaken by Teacher Tapp, which is a commercially-run app where teachers may take part in a daily survey.

2.32 Remote learning also affected the well-being of some children, as well as their education. In an ONS survey, 41% of respondents said that home schooling was negatively affecting the well-being of their child or children in their household (**Figure 7**). A report by the Children's Commissioner, based on surveys in March and June 2020, found that 41% of children reported feeling more stressed about their schoolwork and exams in June than when the disruption began, while 17% said they had become less stressed.[21]

Figure 7

Homeschooling adults' views on the impacts of homeschooling in Great Britain, 24 April to 3 May 2020

Forty-one per cent of adults who were homeschooling children reported that it was negatively affecting their children's well-being



Note

1 This Figure is based on a sample of 160 adults who reported homeschooling a dependent child in the previous seven days. The survey was carried out from 24 April to 3 May 2020, and results were weighted to be a nationally representative sample of Great Britain.

Source: Office for National Statistics, *Opinions and Lifestyle Survey – Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain*, 14 May 2020

21 Children's Commissioner for England, *Stress among children in England during the coronavirus lockdown*, September 2020. Based on a survey of 1,851 children and young people aged eight to 17 in England, from 13 to 27 March 2020; and another survey of 2,000 children and young people aged eight to 17, from 18 to 25 June 2020.

Part Three

Impact of disrupted schooling on children

3.1 This part of the report covers the likely longer-term effects on children's learning of the disruption to schooling between March and July 2020, and the Department for Education's (the Department's) programme to help children catch up on missed learning.

Lost learning

3.2 There is a growing body of evidence indicating that the period of disrupted schooling will have longer-term adverse effects on children's learning and development:

- In her annual report in December 2020, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector noted that many children had lost not just a term's education, but also the consolidation of what they had been taught in previous years.[22] Her report concluded that 'learning loss' is likely to have been significant and will be reflected in widening attainment gaps.[23] It referred to previous research which suggested that, in normal times, being absent for eight days would move a pupil one place down a ranking of 100 pupils by achievement.
- Ofsted reports in late 2020 found primary school leaders most commonly identified that pupils had lost some of their knowledge and skills in reading. Younger primary pupils were worst affected, with negative impacts on, for example, social and communication skills, speech and listening skills. In secondary schools, literacy and maths were also a concern. Leaders in both primary and secondary phases said that pupils were finding it difficult to write for long periods of time.[24]
- In September 2020, the Children's Commissioner concluded that children, and especially vulnerable children such as those with special educational needs and disabilities, might struggle to reintegrate into the classroom after such a long period away.[25]

22 Ofsted, *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2019/20*, December 2020.
23 The term 'attainment gap' means a persistent difference in academic performance between different demographic groups of pupils.
24 Ofsted, *COVID-19 series: briefing on schools, October 2020*, November 2020. Based on 380 'interim visits' (rather than inspections) to schools between 29 September and 23 October 2020; Ofsted, *COVID-19 series: briefing on schools, November 2020*, December 2020. Based on 297 interim visits to schools between 2 and 24 November 2020.
25 Children's Commissioner for England, *Childhood in the time of Covid*, September 2020.

- In a July 2020 survey, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found that 98% of teachers considered their pupils were behind where they would normally expect them to be in their curriculum learning at the end of the 2019/20 academic year. On average, teachers estimated their pupils to be three months behind.[26]

- An internal departmental report compiled in June 2020 concluded that the impact of the disruption on educational outcomes was negative, due to both the quantity and quality of home learning. It suggested that at primary level the average learning loss tended to increase with age, while at secondary level, year 11 pupils who had been due to sit exams may have lost motivation to study, which might lead to lower attainment later.

3.3 In September 2020, the Department commissioned Renaissance Learning and the Education Policy Institute to research the quantitative impact of lost time in education on children's academic development. Interim findings from this research, based on assessments taken by children in the first half of the 2020 autumn term, were published in February 2021.[27] They showed, for example, that children in primary schools had experienced, on average, an estimated learning loss of just over three months in maths, and were typically between 1.7 and 2.0 months behind in reading.

3.4 Early assessments expect disadvantaged children to have lost out disproportionately from the disruption to schooling. In its July 2020 survey, NFER found that 61% of teachers estimated that the learning gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers had widened since the previous year.[28] Furthermore, teachers in the most deprived schools were more than three times more likely to report that their pupils were four months or more behind in their curriculum learning than teachers in the least deprived schools.

3.5 Interim findings from the Department's research also showed regional and socio-economic variation in the extent of estimated lost learning:

- The extent varied by region, for example, children in secondary schools in Yorkshire and the Humber and in the North East lost 2.4 and 2.3 months of progress in reading respectively, compared with 1.3 in the East of England and in the North West, and 1.2 in the South East.

26 Sharp, C., Nelson. J., Lucas. M., Julius, J., McCrone. T. and Sims, D. (2020). *Schools' responses to Covid-19: The challenges facing schools and pupils in September 2020*. Slough: NFER. Based on findings from a weighted sample of 2,958 school leaders and teachers across 2,203 schools. From 8 to 15 July 2020, NFER collected data via a survey sent to all 20,553 state-funded mainstream primary and secondary schools in England.

27 Department for Education, *Understanding progress in the 2020/21 academic year: interim findings, January 2021,* February 2021. The assessment of learning loss is based on the results of more than one million pupil assessments (the majority of which were in reading) carried out in the first half of the 2020/21 autumn term. The achieved sample sizes meant that the analysis focused on year groups 3 to 9.

28 See footnote 26.

- Children in schools with high levels of disadvantage experienced more reading loss. In secondary schools, for example, pupils in schools with high levels of free school meal eligibility experienced 2.2 months of reading learning loss, compared with 1.5 months in schools with low levels of free school meal eligibility.

3.6 In June 2020, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) examined the possible impacts of school closures in the 2019/20 academic year on the attainment gap.[29] It projected that the disruption might widen the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers by between 11% and 75%, with a median estimate of 36%, likely reversing progress made to narrow the gap since 2011.

Catch-up learning programme

3.7 In June, the Department announced a £1 billion catch-up learning programme. It recognised that children had missed out due to the disruption to schooling and that those from disadvantaged backgrounds were at most risk of falling behind.

Funding

3.8 The programme comprises two main elements: a £650 million universal catch-up premium allocated to schools on a per-pupil basis, and a £350 million National Tutoring Programme (NTP) targeted at disadvantaged children. Of the £1 billion total funding, 80% was additional funding from the HM Treasury reserve and the Department took 20% from other budgets.

3.9 Of the £350 million announced in June for the NTP, the Department has allocated £213 million for 2020/21 (**Figure 8** overleaf). It considered that it could not scale up the NTP schemes for tuition partners or academic mentors faster without jeopardising delivery and quality of provision. In the November 2020 Spending Review, the government carried forward the remaining £137 million to fund the NTP in 2021/22. Schools are expected to meet 25% of the costs of the tuition provided under the tuition partners scheme, amounting to around £21 million. Some teaching unions have raised concerns that schools may not be able to cover these costs, and therefore may not benefit from the scheme.

29 Education Endowment Foundation, *Impact of school closures on the attainment gap: Rapid Evidence Assessment*, June 2020. Based on a systematic search of existing literature. Eleven studies were identified that provided quantitative evidence about the impact of school closures on attainment gaps. A subset of nine studies provided comparable estimates that could be synthesised.

Figure 8
Catch-up learning programme funding in England, 2020/21

Element		Description	2020/21 funding
			(£m)
Catch-up premium		A universal premium allocated to schools on a per-pupil basis, equating to: £80 per pupil in mainstream schools (reception to year 11); and £240 per pupil in special schools, alternative provision and hospital schools.	650
National Tutoring Programme (NTP)	Schemes for children aged five to 16	NTP tuition partners, led by the Education Endowment Foundation. Academic tuition provided one-to-one or in small groups for children aged five to 16, delivered by 33 NTP tuition partners. The scheme covers 75% of tuition costs, with schools covering the remaining 25%.	80
		NTP academic mentors, led by Teach First. 1,000 to 1,200 full-time mentors employed in disadvantaged schools.	28
	Fund for students aged 16 to 19	A ringfenced grant to education providers, allocated on the basis of low-attaining students, to be spent on small-group tuition. Schools either pay their own teaching staff or buy in support from external tutoring organisations.	96
	Early years language intervention	Delivery of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention, a 20-week programme designed to improve the spoken language skills of reception-age children.	9
Total			**863**

Note
1 The amounts represent Department for Education funding for the academic year 2020/21.

Source: National Audit Office summary of Department for Education information

Appointing providers

3.10 In July, the Department appointed external organisations to run the NTP tuition partners and academic mentors schemes. To get the schemes running quickly, it looked first to organisations with whom it had existing relationships to assess whether they had the capacity and capability to lead the schemes, rather than carrying out a competitive procurement exercise:

- For the tuition partners scheme, the Department appointed EEF through a variation of its existing grant. It concluded that EEF was the best provider for the scheme because of its role in developing evidence-based policy and the initial proposal for the scheme. The Department also considered EEF's track record in funding educational projects, although it recognised that the tuition partners scheme represented a shift in scale and pace of delivery.
- For the academic mentors scheme, the Department appointed Teach First through a variation of its existing contract. It concluded that Teach First was the best provider for the scheme because of its positive track record in delivering similar schemes. The Department considered Teach First was the only provider able to deliver the scheme at the scale and pace required.

3.11 In October, a review for the Department's audit and risk committee noted that the variation of the grant to EEF lacked detail on how EEF would allocate the tuition partners budget, including what proportion it would take as a management fee. The review also noted that, without competitive procurement and direct involvement in selecting tutoring providers, it was difficult for the Department to guarantee value for money would be achieved.

3.12 The Department has taken steps to mitigate these risks. It has established regular performance reporting, including on take-up and expenditure, and a delivery board to oversee the schemes. EEF's grant conditions stipulate that it must ensure approved tuition providers are paid no more than the market rate. The Department also plans to tender competitively for future years of funding, and has commissioned independent evaluations of both the tuition partners and academic mentors schemes.

Progress

Universal catch-up premium

3.13 Schools will receive catch-up premium funding in three tranches during 2020/21. The first two payments were made in the autumn and spring terms, equating to £47 per pupil for mainstream schools and £140 per high-needs place. Schools will receive a final payment in the summer term to bring the total funding to £80 and £240 respectively.

3.14 The Department has commissioned an independent research study to understand what approaches schools are using to address the learning lost due to the pandemic, including how they have used catch-up premium funds. Interim findings from the study are expected in August 2021.

NTP tuition partners scheme

3.15 The Department expected the tuition partners scheme, announced in June 2020, to reach between 200,000 and 250,000 children. At February 2021, 125,200 children had been allocated a tutoring place across 3,984 schools. While the Department has specifically designed the scheme to support disadvantaged children, for example those eligible for pupil premium, it has not specified what proportion of children accessing the scheme should be eligible for pupil premium. Schools are encouraged to focus on pupils eligible for pupil premium, but are free to use their professional judgement to identify the children who would benefit most. Of the 125,200 children allocated a tutoring place, 41,100 had started to receive tuition, of whom 44% were eligible for pupil premium. This raises questions over the extent to which the scheme will reach the most disadvantaged children.

NTP academic mentors scheme

3.16 Demand for the academic mentors scheme has outstripped supply. The scheme was expected to place between 1,000 and 1,200 mentors in disadvantaged schools. At January 2021, Teach First had received requests for mentors from 1,789 eligible schools (based on a maximum of two mentors per school). Academic mentors were placed in schools in three tranches in October 2020, and January and February 2021. In total around 1,100 mentors were placed across 1,100 schools, meaning more than 600 schools that requested a mentor have not received one.

3.17 Teach First told us that, where it is unable to match a mentor to an eligible school, it works with the tuition partners scheme to explore alternative support. Stakeholders have raised concerns that, with most mentors not placed in schools until the spring term, there will not be enough time for them to have sufficient impact.

Developments in early 2021

3.18 The further disruption to schooling in the early months of 2021 is likely to exacerbate the learning loss caused by the initial period of disruption in the spring and summer terms of 2020. It has also presented challenges for the NTP as some tutoring and mentoring originally intended to be delivered face-to-face has had to be adapted so that it can be provided remotely.

3.19 In February 2021, the government announced the appointment of an Education Recovery Commissioner for a period of nine months. He will advise ministers on the approach for education recovery, with a particular focus on helping students catch up on learning lost as a result of the pandemic. Also in February, the Department set out a further £700 million of funding to help children catch up on missed learning and development. The package includes: a one-off £302 million 'recovery premium' for schools; £200 million to expand tutoring programmes and support language development in early years settings; and £200 million for secondary schools to provide summer schools for those pupils who need it most.

Appendix One

Our audit approach

1 This report examines the Department for Education's (the Department's) support for children's education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic between March and July 2020, and its action to help children catch up on the learning they lost during that period. We focused particularly on disadvantaged and vulnerable children. We did not assess the value for money of the Department's support.

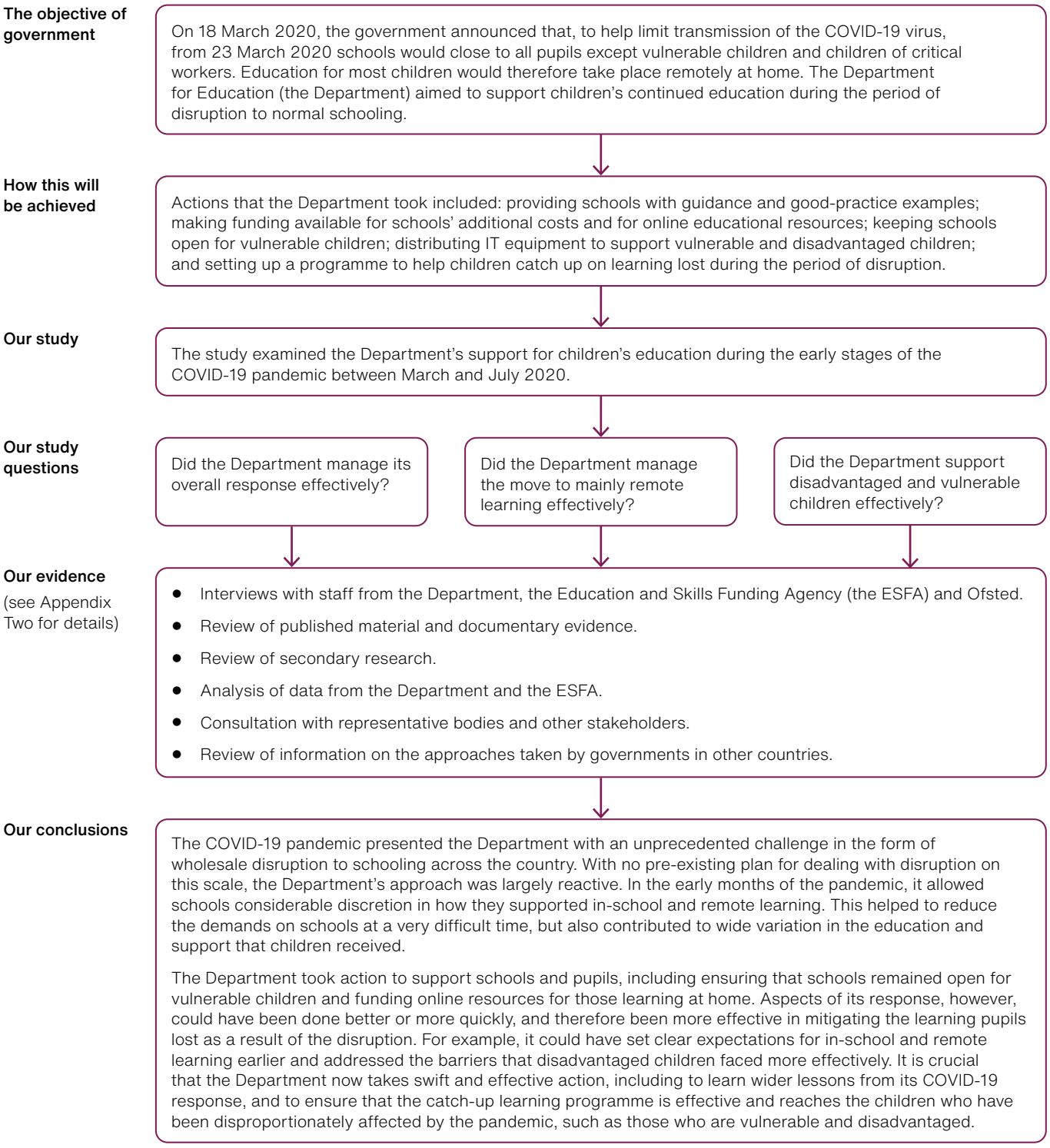
2 Where appropriate, the report also refers to the additional guidance, support or requirements that the Department continued to roll out for the 2020/21 academic year. We did not assess the Department's actions during the second major period of disrupted schooling that began in January 2021.

3 The report covers:

- the Department's overall response to COVID-19 in the school system;
- the support provided for children's learning, both in school and remotely; and
- the impact of disrupted schooling on children.

4 Our audit approach is summarised in **Figure 9**, and our evidence base is described in Appendix Two.

Figure 9
Our audit approach



Appendix Two

Our evidence base

1 We reached our independent conclusions on the Department for Education's (the Department's) support for children's education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, after analysing evidence collected between September 2020 and February 2021.

2 Our report covers pupils aged four to 19 in the state school system, including maintained schools and academies (including 16-to-19 providers), but excluding stand-alone nurseries, independent schools and non-maintained special schools, unless otherwise stated.

3 We focused mainly on the period from early 2020, as the Department began to develop its response to the pandemic, to the end of the summer term in July 2020. However, in places, the report comments on changes in approach that took place in, or extended into, the academic year that began in September 2020. It also covers the Department's catch-up programme, which is being delivered from 2020/21 and is designed to help make up for the learning that children may have lost during the earlier period of disrupted schooling.

4 The report does not cover examinations or assessment, or the free school meals voucher scheme. We reported on the voucher scheme in December 2020.[30]

5 We interviewed staff from the Department and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (the ESFA). The people we interviewed at the Department included those responsible for overall strategy and governance, policy on vulnerable and disadvantaged children, quality of teaching and learning in schools, and the catch-up learning programme. The ESFA staff we interviewed were responsible for overseeing exceptional costs funding for schools. We also interviewed staff from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and Teach First about the National Tutoring Programme.

6 We interviewed staff from Ofsted and the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England. The interview with Ofsted focused on its role in national oversight of schools and the regional education and children's teams that were established at the start of the pandemic. The interview with the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England focused on the impact of the pandemic on children's education and well-being, and the effectiveness of the Department's response.

30 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Investigation into the free school meals voucher scheme*, Session 2019–2021, HC 1036, National Audit Office, December 2020.

7 We reviewed published and unpublished documents from the Department and the ESFA, and published reports from Ofsted. We used this information to understand how these bodies responded to the pandemic and the steps they took to support children's education, and the impact of disrupted schooling on children. These documents included material relating to:

- strategy and governance;
- communications and stakeholder engagement;
- exceptional costs funding;
- support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
- provision of IT equipment and internet access;
- the nature and quality of in-school learning;
- the nature and quality of remote learning; and
- the catch-up learning programme.

8 We analysed financial and other data:

- Schools' claims for, and the ESFA's payments relating to, exceptional costs funding.
- Information requests to the Department's coronavirus helpline and email inbox.
- Departmental information relating to pupils' school and college attendance, based on school and college survey data.
- Departmental spending on, and delivery of, IT equipment and internet access.
- Planned departmental spending on the catch-up learning programme and take-up of the National Tutoring Programme schemes for five- to 16-year-olds.

9 We reviewed secondary research evidence on issues relating to children's education during the pandemic. We used this research to:

- explore variation in the quantity and quality of in-school and remote education children received during the pandemic;
- evidence the possible impacts of the disruption to schooling, including on the attainment gap; and
- understand parents' and teachers' perspectives on their experiences.

The research included publications by: the Chartered College of Teaching; EEF; the Education Policy Institute; the Institute for Fiscal Studies; the Institute for Social and Economic Research; the National Foundation for Educational Research; Oak National Academy; the Office for National Statistics; the Sutton Trust; and UCL Institute of Education.

10 We invited stakeholders to respond to a consultation exercise. We asked stakeholders for their views, and any supporting evidence they had, on the following issues:

- how the Department had engaged with them and other stakeholders during the early stages of the pandemic;
- the helpfulness of the Department's guidance;
- how effectively the Department supported vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
- how effectively the Department supported remote learning;
- the design of the catch-up programme; and
- what the Department should do differently in the event of any future major disruption to learning in schools.

11 We met, or received written responses from:

- the Association of Directors of Children's Services;
- the Chartered College of Teaching;
- the Child Poverty Action Group;
- the Independent Provider of Special Education Advice;
- the National Association for Special Educational Needs;
- the National Autistic Society;
- the National Education Union;
- the National Foundation for Educational Research;
- Natspec;
- NASUWT, The Teachers' Union;
- Parentkind;
- Sense;
- the Special Educational Consortium; and
- Thomas Pocklington Trust.

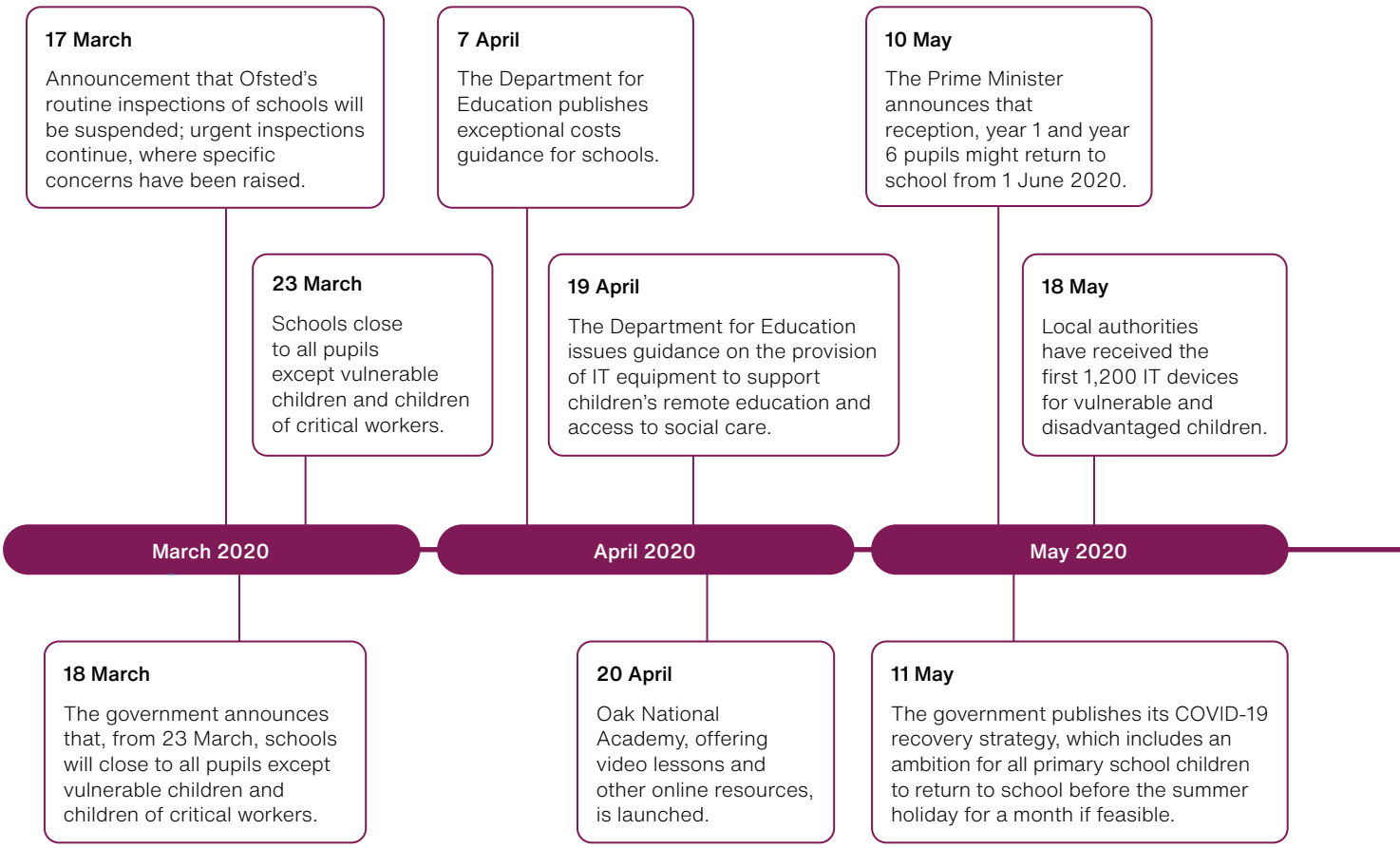
12 **We gathered comparative information from the supreme audit institutions of other countries.** We did this to compare, at a high level, the Department's response to COVID-19 with that of education ministries overseas. This exercise was part of our cooperation with the EUROSAI (European Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions) project group on auditing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We sought information on issues such as: school closures; support for, and assurance about, remote learning; minimum educational standards during the period of disruption; and plans for catch-up support. We received responses from 24 countries in total.

13 **We collected information and views from National Audit Office staff in our London and Newcastle offices who had experience of schooling during the pandemic.** This exercise helped us to understand the various approaches that schools were taking to supporting children's education and the impact of remote learning on families.

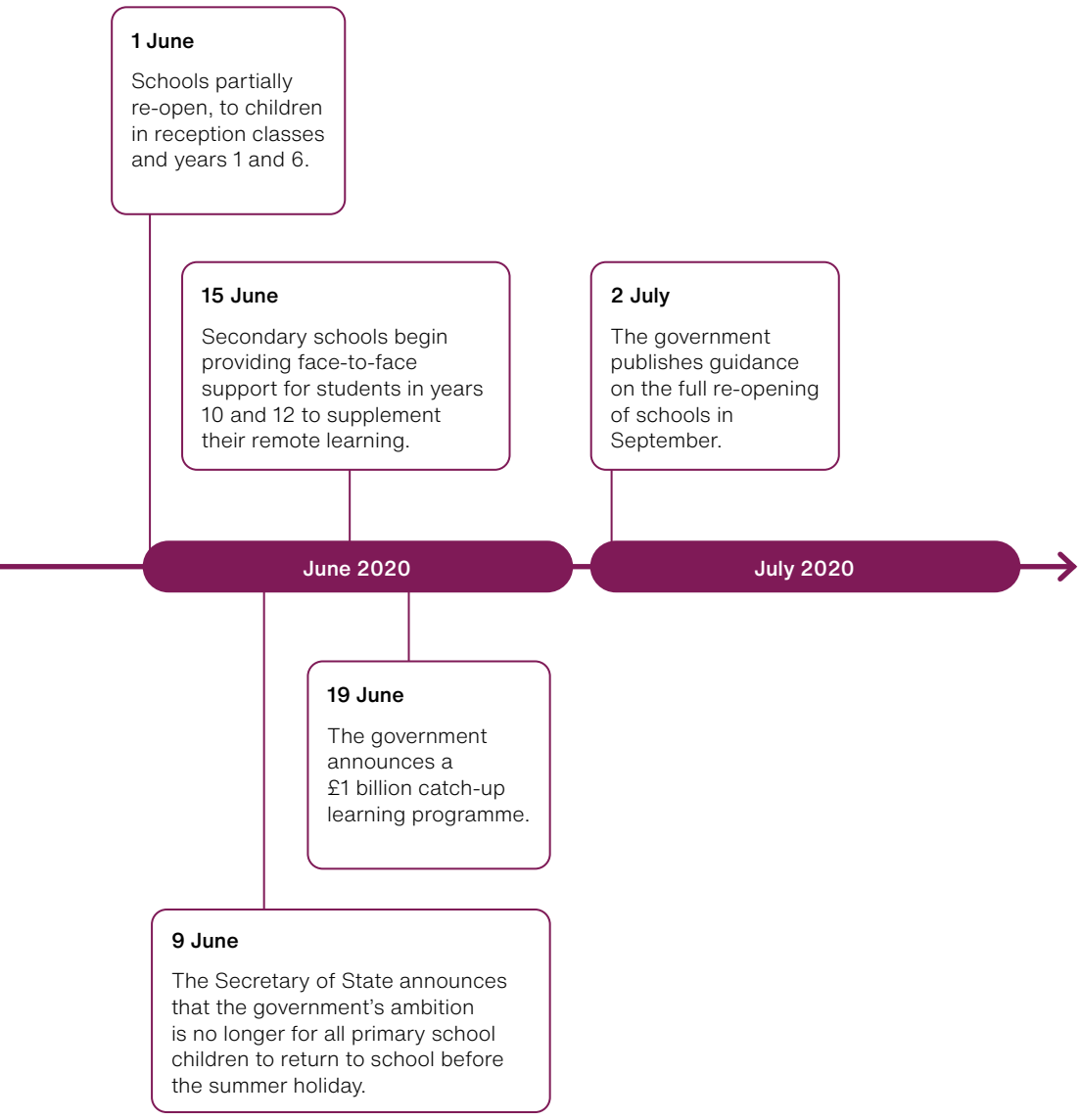
Appendix Three

Timeline of key events

Figure 10
Timeline of key events in the school system in England between March and July 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: National Audit Office


1 June
Schools partially re-open, to children in reception classes and years 1 and 6.
15 June
Secondary schools begin providing face-to-face support for students in years 10 and 12 to supplement their remote learning.
2 July
The government publishes guidance on the full re-opening of schools in September.
June 2020
July 2020
19 June
The government announces a £1 billion catch-up learning programme.
9 June
The Secretary of State announces that the government's ambition is no longer for all primary school children to return to school before the summer holiday.

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