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Research and analysis

Education recovery in schools: summer 2022

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The picture overall

During the 2021/22 academic year, we have published <u>briefings on the continued effects of the</u> COVID-19 pandemic and education recovery in schools. Pupils, staff and leaders have been affected in a number of ways, but we have also seen many schools using effective strategies to help pupils catch up and recover from the pandemic.

In this final briefing of the series, we draw on evidence from a sample of inspections carried out in the summer term 2022 and from discussions with school inspectors. This was to understand how schools have supported pupils, with a particular focus on pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and those sitting external tests and exams this term. We also reflect across the series of briefings to consider how things have changed over the school year.

Leaders said that fewer pupils were absent from school because of COVID-19 compared with the spring term. However, COVID-19-related anxiety was still an issue for a few parents in some schools. Some leaders have also seen an increase in pupil absence due to families taking rescheduled holidays.

Leaders continued to mention the negative impact of the pandemic on pupils' well-being and behaviour. Schools had resumed many curriculum enrichment activities. This included clubs, inviting external speakers into school, day trips and residential trips. Some schools had difficulties staffing enrichment activities, either because of COVID-19 or because staff were already busy delivering tutoring and catch-up sessions.

The pandemic has affected pupils' learning during the year. As we come to the end of the school year, some pupils are not as ready for the next stage as they would usually be. Children in Reception joined with a wider range of starting points. Despite much work from schools, some have not caught up to where they need to be as they move into key stage 1. Similarly, some Year 6 pupils are not ready for secondary school. Many Year 11 and Year 13 pupils have also missed out on work experience opportunities.

For some pupils with SEND, the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect. Schools with strong systems in place before COVID-19 were continuing to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. Effective support happened when schools had a clear understanding of pupils' individual needs and what extra help was required to meet the curriculum expectations. The pandemic has delayed some pupils receiving support from external or specialist services.

In summer 2022, pupils were sitting external tests for the first time since the pandemic began. Staff said that exam anxiety was higher than usual and they supported pupils in a variety of ways. We saw good practice in schools that had balanced helping pupils to develop and revise their subject knowledge with preparing them for exams. In some schools, we saw the curriculum being overly narrowed to focus on exam topics, which may affect pupils' readiness for the next stage.

Schools were continuing to help pupils catch up by using many of the strategies described in our previous briefings. Schools were also identifying pupils who needed additional, bespoke support to help them to catch up. Some schools were using the National Tutoring Programme, often to pay their own staff to tutor. We saw tutoring being used effectively when it targeted specific gaps in knowledge and was clearly linked to the school's curriculum.

In the summer term, fewer staff were absent due to COVID-19. The pandemic has highlighted the broader issue of staff shortages in the sector, with some leaders saying turnover has been higher and recruitment more difficult than pre-pandemic. Staff were also reporting increased workloads and many leaders were working hard to support their staff.

The pandemic has exacerbated other existing challenges for schools. These include persistent pupil absence and access to specialist services. It is clear that many leaders and staff have worked tirelessly and creatively across the year to settle pupils back into school routines and help them catch up academically. For some pupils, this has been successful. However, some pupils are still behind both academically and in terms of wider development, which will affect them in future. This will be a challenge for these pupils as they take their next step.

Methodological note

This briefing draws on evidence gathered during routine school inspections and through focus group discussions with school inspectors. We use this evidence to illustrate:

how the pandemic continues to affect pupils' learning and personal development

- approaches that schools are using to help pupils catch up, with particular focus on pupils with SEND
- how schools are helping pupils prepare for external tests and exams

The findings in this briefing are based on evidence collected during routine inspections of 19 primary schools, 21 secondary schools and 23 special schools in England between 18 April and 13 May 2022.

We held discussions and collected insights from 59 school inspectors: 48 Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and 11 Senior HMI. Those who took part in discussions had personal experience of inspecting schools in the 2021/22 academic year and/or had overseen the work of HMI in their region. They had a range of inspection experience, including of primary, secondary and special schools. There was representation from all <u>8 Ofsted regions</u>.

We cannot assume that the findings are representative of the whole sector. They record the challenges that some pupils and schools continued to experience, and the approaches schools used to help pupils catch up.

The current state of children's education and personal development

Attendance

In most schools, leaders said that pupils' attendance had improved following a peak in COVID-19 cases during the spring term. Some leaders said that attendance was now back to pre-pandemic levels. However, other schools were still experiencing higher absence rates than pre-pandemic.

Leaders said persistent absences were often related to COVID-19, for example because of pupils' or parents' anxiety about COVID-19. [footnote 1] In special schools, parental anxiety was common when pupils had medical needs that could be exacerbated by COVID-19. Pupils with SEND have historically been more likely to be persistent absentees and inspectors saw this continuing in the summer term. [footnote 2]

During the summer term, some leaders told us that pupils were absent because of rescheduled holidays that had been postponed because of the pandemic. We also saw this during the autumn term.

Schools have used several strategies to encourage attendance, including:

- engaging with families to communicate high expectations for school attendance and to reassure anxious parents
- supporting pupils to return with enhanced pastoral support
- providing practical help, such as arranging transport and access to breakfast clubs

In February 2022, we published a report that gives further examples of <u>schools' approaches to improving and maintaining attendance</u>.

Pupils' readiness for the next stage

In the summer term, leaders said that some pupils are not as ready for the next stage as they would usually be.

Our <u>briefing on early years recovery</u> found that some children who will be starting in Reception do not have the independence or social skills that they usually would.

Some Reception children are also not as ready for Year 1 as they would usually be. These pupils started school with limited pre-school experiences and with a wider range of starting points. Most schools have supported children in the Reception Year well, particularly in speech and language development. Many children have caught up academically, but some are still not where they need to be for key stage 1.

Some leaders have also been concerned about current key stage 1 pupils who missed out on early teaching and have not yet caught up, particularly in phonics and handwriting. Some pupils were still struggling with behavioural expectations and social skills such as listening.

Year 6 pupils have had less experience in the foundation subjects because of the pandemic. This was often because these subjects were not taught when schools were partially closed, because pupils did not learn well remotely and/or because leaders focused on core subjects, particularly in preparation for the return of key stage 2 national curriculum tests. Secondary schools will need to consider this for pupils starting in September 2022.

We have seen some primary and secondary schools working more closely together to understand what knowledge pupils have. However, the pandemic has limited some partnership working between primary and secondary schools that would usually have helped Year 6 pupils transition to Year 7. Schools were starting to offer these opportunities again; for example, primary school pupils were able to use science laboratories at a secondary school.

This term, many leaders highlighted concerns about pupils in key stage 3. This was particularly the case for Year 7 and Year 8, as the pandemic disrupted the transition from primary school to secondary school for these pupils. Subject leaders had found more variation in pupils' knowledge and skills, depending on primary school provision during the pandemic. Some were still catching up on key stage 2 curriculum content, including in reading and mathematics. Some Year 7 and Year 8 pupils were still struggling with behaviour expectations, and often displayed less mature behaviour than pupils of this age might previously have done.

In most cases, special schools were once again offering activities to develop independence, such as trips in the local community, travelling on a bus and shopping. Leaders recognise the particular importance of providing these sorts of opportunities for pupils with SEND, to support their preparation for adult life.

Throughout our series of education recovery briefings, we have found that the provision of careers information, education, advice and guidance has been mixed. This was particularly common in relation to work experience. Some schools had plans in place for work experience in the summer term 2022 and for the next academic year. Many pupils in Year 11 and Year 13 have missed out on opportunities for work experience. A few leaders explained that work experience had been difficult to set up because employers were reluctant to facilitate placements. Alternative opportunities provided by schools included:

- virtual opportunities, such as interviews
- presentations from different professions
- work experience in the school or trust

Curriculum enrichment activities

Over the education recovery series, we have seen schools offering varying enrichment opportunities. In the autumn term, enrichment programmes were still suspended in some schools, but by spring most schools were offering some activities. In most cases, schools have been attempting to return to their full enrichment offer as quickly as possible over this academic year.

By the summer term, most schools had reinstated several curriculum enrichment activities at lunchtime and/or after school. A few schools had timetabled enrichment activities into the normal school day to ensure that all pupils benefited from the opportunity. Most schools were offering a variety of clubs (such as sports, art, music, chess and debating) and inviting external speakers into school. Many schools had also re-established day trips (including to theatres and museums) and some had held residential trips.

In other schools, clubs tended to focus on catching up with academic work rather than on pupils'

broader personal development. Some had prioritised funding for helping pupils to catch up in academic subjects, which reduced the enrichment activities they could offer.

A few leaders said they were still preparing to offer further enrichment opportunities, and these were 'on the horizon'. In these cases, it was usually day and residential trips that were not back up and running.

Some leaders said that they have thought more carefully, since schools fully re-opened, about how enrichment activities are linked to the curriculum. Others had adjusted their activities; for example, they had engaged with groups in the local area and offered new computer clubs to reflect the increase in technology use.

In some schools, fewer pupils were taking part in enrichment activities compared with before the pandemic. A few leaders had recognised this and said they were raising awareness of enrichment opportunities and encouraging all pupils to take part.

On occasion, pupils in exam years told us that they did not participate in enrichment activities because they wanted to catch up on academic work instead. In some schools, other factors influencing pupils' participation included parents' concern about their child using public transport and fewer families needing after-school provision because their working patterns changed during the pandemic.

Some schools have found it a challenge to provide enrichment activities and clubs. This has been due to COVID-related staff absence, as well as increased workload caused by staff delivering tutoring and catch-up sessions. Some leaders told us about the rising cost of living for families, which may prevent pupils' uptake of enrichment activities, both for the summer term and in the future, as well as schools' ability to subsidise such activities. In the Sutton Trust's recent survey on school funding, a quarter of senior leaders in primary and secondary schools had reduced trips and outings for financial reasons. [footnote 3]

In special schools, pupil transport was identified as a barrier to taking part in enrichment opportunities. It restricted some special schools to offering enrichment activities during the school day. Some schools have also put additional COVID-related measures in place, including enhanced risk assessments, because they have pupils with medical needs. Despite this, most special schools had re-established some enrichment activities, including clubs and trips.

Pupils' behaviour and well-being

Across the academic year, leaders said the pandemic had resulted in poorer behaviour among some pupils. This was commonly characterised by:

- poorer social skills, such as not taking turns or sharing
- not engaging with learning
- inappropriate behaviours, such as bullying and fighting

Behaviour issues were most common when pupils returned to school in autumn 2021. By the summer term, most pupils' behaviour had settled back to how it was before the pandemic, or was getting back on track. Where pupils' behaviour settled well, staff and leaders had spent time reestablishing high expectations with pupils and parents, and were consistent in their approach. Some schools had created new behaviour policies and procedures during the pandemic.

In the summer term, we continued to hear that the pandemic had negatively affected some pupils' mental health and well-being. As we have reported in our previous briefings, some leaders had observed greater anxiety and lower self-confidence among some pupils. Schools were continuing to use the approaches we reported in our <u>April 2022 briefing</u>, including expanding their pastoral staff teams. Some schools were providing training for staff based on pupils' needs arising from the pandemic, such as bereavement or anxiety.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities

Impact of the pandemic

Across the year, leaders and staff identified pupils with SEND as being hardest hit by the pandemic. Some pupils with SEND missed out on tailored support during the pandemic, resulting in more pronounced gaps in knowledge and skills.

Some school leaders are seeking to refer more pupils for SEND assessments than they would have done before the pandemic. Parents have also been more likely to ask about SEND assessments for their child. The disruption to teaching and closure of schools are likely to have hindered SEND identification for some pupils. In the summer term, some school leaders were still unpicking whether concerns were because pupils had SEND or whether their additional needs were a result of pandemic disruption, such as gaps in knowledge caused by missed learning and delays in speech and language due to fewer opportunities for social interaction.

Supporting pupils to catch up

Good practice in supporting pupils with SEND has not changed because of the pandemic. Most schools that had strong systems in place before the pandemic were continuing to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. Schools providing effective support often used an approach such as the 'graduated approach' from the SEND code of practice – a spiral process of 'assess, plan, do, review'. [footnote 4]

Schools that were providing effective support for pupils with SEND to catch up from the impact of the pandemic had used assessment to identify precisely what pupils did (and did not) know. In these schools, staff identified gaps in pupils' knowledge quickly on their return to school.

In some schools, pupils with SEND received support that was tailored to their specific needs. We saw evidence of this working well. The interventions targeted specific gaps in the pupil's knowledge or skills. They were often carried out in small group sessions and were most commonly seen in English and mathematics. The staff's knowledge and effective training in SEND, as well as in the subject being taught, ensured that support was aligned with pupils' needs. Some schools had trained staff to improve their expertise in SEND during the pandemic.

We have seen some pupils with SEND withdrawn appropriately from lessons to receive interventions. In these cases, leaders made sure that their decisions did not unnecessarily narrow the curriculum for pupils. One leader explained that timetables were planned so that a pupil never missed the same lesson twice. However, not all leaders were considering the impact of taking pupils out of lessons. In some schools, interventions were not implemented quickly enough, which meant that gaps widened further for some pupils with SEND.

Schools were better placed to support pupils with SEND if they had a strong vision and clear intent for their curriculum. This meant that leaders could identify pupils' individual needs and plan appropriate support to help them meet curriculum expectations. Schools that could not accurately identify missed or poorly secured learning were at risk of incorrectly identifying whether pupils' additional needs were due to SEND or because pupils were behind as a result of the pandemic. Where leaders were clear about curriculum content, interventions were also more likely to be closely linked and relevant to the school's curriculum.

Some pupils particularly benefited where the school had addressed their social and emotional needs and their academic needs. Some pupils with SEND, particularly those with sensory needs, benefited from learning in smaller groups and 'class bubbles', introduced as part of COVID-19 restrictions. However, the return to larger class groups has been a challenge for some. Some schools have retained smaller groupings for these pupils.

School transitions can be particularly challenging for pupils with SEND. Some schools had improved their transition processes. For example, some primary schools worked more closely with parents and early years settings, and some secondary schools created video tours for pupils. The relationship between staff and parents of pupils with SEND had improved in some schools because

of the increased communication during the pandemic.

Challenges in catching up

Pupils with SEND have been particularly affected by disruption to external services. Leaders said many pupils faced delays in assessments for education, health and care (EHC) plans. Where there were existing delays, these have been exacerbated. An increase in assessment requests on pupils' return to school created a backlog which we were still seeing in the summer term.

Leaders said waiting lists for mental health services have also increased. Many pupils have had breaks in provision or reduced provision, for example when therapists have been absent because of COVID-19.

Some schools and multi-academy trusts have employed their own professionals, including speech and language therapists, counsellors and educational psychologists, rather than rely on external services. However, this is expensive and is not feasible for all schools.

Staff absence due to COVID-19 has been a concern for leaders throughout this academic year. We heard that inconsistency in staffing, or staff unfamiliar with pupils' individual needs, had a particularly negative impact on pupils with SEND. A few leaders in special schools said that pupils who find it difficult to self-regulate found staff changes particularly challenging. During the pandemic, some schools have recognised that pupils with SEND were finding it unsettling when their key worker was absent. As a result, they were now helping pupils to become more flexible by working with a variety of staff members.

Inspectors noted that the workload of special educational needs and/or disabilities coordinators (SENCos) had risen considerably during the pandemic. This was due to the increase in support requests, combined with a rise in applications for EHC plans and difficulties in accessing external services. In response to the increased workload, some schools recruited additional staff, such as an assistant SENCo or additional teaching assistants.

As set out earlier, pupils with SEND tend to have higher rates of absence than others. While this is a broader issue, it means their education trajectory may take longer to recover.

Many of the challenges pupils with SEND face are long-standing, but have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Our research on the experiences of children and young people with SEND and their families during the 2020/21 academic year found similar challenges.

The return of external tests and exams

Impact of the pandemic

This term, pupils were sitting formal tests and exams for the first time since the pandemic began. Pupils taking national exams were given additional support, including advance information about exam topics and fewer topics to learn in certain GCSE, AS-level and A-level subjects. [footnote 5]

Some leaders highlighted that exam anxiety was higher among pupils than before the pandemic. For this year's Year 11 and Year 13 pupils, their last experience of a formal assessment was 5 or more years ago, when they took key stage 2 tests. Some pupils said that they did not feel ready to sit exams because they did not feel confident in their knowledge and/or exam technique. In some schools, increased pupil anxiety meant that more pupils needed smaller rooms for exams. This required extra planning by school leaders and additional staff to invigilate.

Inspectors also recognised exam stress and anxiety among some staff. We heard that the return of external tests and exams, and with it league tables, is a concern for leaders. Leaders in schools more heavily affected by the pandemic were worried that their schools' results would be affected more than those of other schools. In some schools, this anxiety was transmitted to pupils.

Supporting pupils sitting tests and exams

Schools were using normal techniques to help pupils prepare for tests and exams, including revision and providing targeted support where pupils had knowledge gaps. However, this term we have seen some schools taking this further than usual. For example, some schools provided evening revision sessions and remained open for pupils throughout the Easter holiday. This had increased staff workload. We heard from some pupils that they appreciated their teachers' efforts to prepare them and felt that their teachers were 'doing all they can'.

Schools were also helping pupils to develop exam techniques. Usually this meant completing practice exam papers and questions, often under timed conditions, so that pupils knew what to expect. Where we saw good practice, the teaching of exam technique did not overshadow the teaching of the school's curriculum. However, in some schools, we saw exam techniques being the main focus of lessons this term. Some schools also focused too heavily on exam technique before the pandemic.

Some schools were offering additional emotional support to exam cohorts. On occasion, leaders

told us they were focusing on increasing Year 13 pupils' resilience and confidence. Others spent time explaining to pupils the behavioural expectations of sitting an exam, as pupils had not experienced or seen older cohorts take part in exams.

In some secondary schools, subject leaders were relying more heavily than usual on the exam specification for their teaching, which resulted in the curriculum being narrowed. We had concerns that this practice would affect pupils' readiness for their next steps. In some primary schools, the Year 6 curriculum focused on preparing pupils for key stage 2 national curriculum tests. This limits those pupils' knowledge of foundation subjects, which they need in secondary school.

Catch-up strategies

Curriculum adaptations

Schools were continuing to help pupils catch up by assessing their knowledge and using this information to adapt their curriculum. Our <u>April 2022 briefing</u> provided information about effective approaches to assessment.

This term, we saw the continuation of many of the curriculum adaptations that we reported in our previous briefings. Some schools were giving most of the available targeted support to Year 11 pupils. This is understandable, considering that they were preparing for external exams, but may have been detrimental to other pupils who needed targeted support.

Subject leaders continued to consider what knowledge was crucial for pupils to progress in their subject, and had adapted their curriculum to prioritise this content. They described how it was important that this knowledge was secure before moving on. Staff made deliberate curriculum adaptations to ensure that pupils were well prepared for their next steps. For example, they had aimed to make sure that key stage 3 pupils had the necessary knowledge to begin GCSE courses.

Tutoring

Across the year, we have seen that some schools are using the different routes offered by the National Tutoring Programme to help pupils catch up. [footnote 6] In the autumn, relatively few leaders said that they had set up tutoring programmes, but it was more common in the spring term. We heard that the process of setting up tutoring was lengthy, which may explain why some schools

were only just beginning tutoring.

Most schools had chosen the school-led route and had funded their own teaching staff to act as tutors rather than employ external staff. As we found in our previous briefings, school leaders had struggled to find external tutors. Data from the Department for Education also identified more pupils starting school-led tutoring courses compared with courses led by tuition partners. [footnote 7]

Tutoring was particularly common in English and mathematics. It was delivered through one-to-one or small group sessions, either during or outside normal school hours. Schools tended to target tutoring at those who needed additional help to catch up, disadvantaged pupils, pupils with SEND or specific year groups. Tutoring was working most effectively when schools had used assessment to identify specific gaps in pupils' knowledge, and were using the tutoring to target these gaps.

In the best examples of tutoring, there was a clear link between the school curriculum and the tutoring activity. The school-led approaches to tutoring often meant that staff knew the pupils and the school curriculum, which ensured that tutoring was embedded in pupils' schooling rather than an add-on. Using existing staff members was seen as particularly beneficial for pupils with SEND, as staff were aware of their individual SEND needs. However, using internal staff increases staff workload. We also recognise that, in smaller schools, there are fewer staff to draw on for tutoring.

We have seen some pupils taken out of lessons or other activities for tutoring. Sometimes pupils missed sessions that they would have enjoyed. In some cases, this would be appropriate. However, it is important that leaders consider the impact on pupils. In some schools, leaders had thought this through when planning tutoring in the school timetable.

We are carrying out a <u>review of tutoring in schools and 16 to 19 providers</u> and will publish a report in autumn 2022.

School leadership

Staffing

We continued to see some COVID-related staff absence during the summer term, but rates were not as high as in the spring. Absence was usually due to staff testing positive for COVID-19; however, this term, more leaders also said that they had staff members off sick with long-COVID symptoms. In some schools, staff turnover has also been higher than pre-pandemic. This has exacerbated the ongoing challenge of staff recruitment. [footnote 8] In some mainstream and special

schools, recruiting staff with SEND expertise has been a particular challenge.

In some cases, staff absence has impacted on what schools could provide; for example, some leaders have had to postpone reading interventions. It was also a challenge in special schools, where certain provision required 2 members of staff, for example during hydrotherapy and when hoisting pupils. More broadly, inspectors noted that staff absence may result in non-specialist teaching, as lessons are covered by supply teachers or non-specialist staff. This may affect the quality of education.

During the summer term, there was a mixed picture of how the pandemic affected staff development. In some schools, staff had missed out on opportunities for professional development, which they attributed to COVID-19. In one school, staff training was taking place outside working hours, because of staff shortages. In mainstream and special schools, staff recognised that online training provided additional development opportunities. We are currently carrying out a review of teachers' professional development and will publish a report in early 2023.

School staff recognised that the pandemic had increased workloads and created additional pressures for staff. In some secondary schools, staff were spending more time managing safeguarding concerns around pupils' use of digital technology. Leaders believed that this was because pupils had used technology more during the pandemic.

Most staff felt supported by senior leaders. Some schools had set up staff well-being initiatives following the pandemic. Staff said leaders were helping to reduce workloads where possible, including covering staff absence and sharing planning with linked schools. Governors said that they were mindful of senior leaders' well-being.

School improvement planning

The pandemic had not stopped most schools from moving forward. In our graded inspections (previously referred to as section 5 inspections) carried out between September and December 2021, more schools improved to good or outstanding than declined to requires improvement or inadequate. [footnote 9] However, some school leaders told us that the pandemic had slowed their work on curriculum development and implementation in specific subject areas. This was often because of staff absence due to COVID-19, a focus on core subjects and/or undeveloped subject leader knowledge.

This term, leaders in a few schools said that they were not monitoring teaching and learning as thoroughly as before the pandemic. We had also found this in spring. Some governors said they were now back visiting schools.

We have heard that schools plan to continue with some of the approaches that were set up during

the pandemic. These often included continuing to use technology for online staff training, meetings (for example, with governors) and, in some cases, parents' evenings. Some schools also continued to split pupils into smaller groups for lunch and breaktimes, for example by staggering lunchtimes or creating zones for different year groups.

We have seen that some of these changes can be beneficial. For example, online review meetings for pupils with SEND resulted in a greater number of stakeholders attending compared with meetings held face to face. However, leaders need to be sure that the choices they make are an improvement. For example, some parents said that they would now like more face-to-face communication with schools. Leaders have found that split lunchtimes have helped to improve pupils' behaviour, but they may restrict pupils from joining clubs and socialising.

- A pupil is classified as a persistent absentee if they miss 10% or more possible sessions in a given time period. <u>'Pupil absence statistics: methodology'</u>, Department for Education, May 2022. <u>←</u>
- 2. 'Autumn term 2019/20: pupil absence in schools in England', Department for Education, December 2020.

 €
- 3. 'School funding and pupil premium 2022', The Sutton Trust, April 2022. €
- 4. <u>'SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years'</u>, Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, April 2020. *全*
- 5. <u>'Subject-by-subject support for GCSE, AS and A level students in 2022'</u>, Ofqual, February 2022. *€*
- 6. 'National tutoring programme (NTP)', Department for Education, September 2021. €
- 7. 'National tutoring programme', Department for Education, May 2022.
- 8. <u>'Teacher shortages in England: analysis and pay options'</u>, Education Policy Institute, March 2020. <u>←</u>
- 9. <u>'State-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 December 2021'</u>, Ofsted, March 2022. *€*

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