

Committee of Public Accounts

Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children

Thirteenth Report of Session 2024–25

HC 365

Committee of Public Accounts

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Summary

It remains concerning that in England around 2 million children identified as being from disadvantaged backgrounds are behind their peers academically, impacting their future life chances. In 2022/23 25% of disadvantaged pupils achieved grade 5 or above in English and Maths GCSE, compared with 52% of those not known to be disadvantaged. The slight narrowing of the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers recently is heading in the right direction. Although we welcome the Department's commitment to remain focused on closing the attainment gap, progress is too slow and risks too many children being left behind.

The Department has taken positive steps to improve its understanding of what works to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children. Given that strong evidence is a pre-requisite for effective decision-making the Department needs to continue widening and strengthening its evidence, particularly in early years where disadvantaged children are already around four months behind. It also needs to more clearly demonstrate how it is using this evidence to better inform funding decisions. The evidence base for the effectiveness of its flagship policy, Pupil Premium, to support the attainment of disadvantaged children is relatively strong compared to other interventions, but spending fell 3% over the period 2018–19 to 2023–24, with £2.8 million spent in 2023–24.

Over 90% of the estimated £9.2 billion disadvantage related funding is not ring-fenced. By giving schools and early years providers flexibility to decide how to spend funding according to local circumstance, the Department is less able to track and evaluate how money is spent and the impact it has had. Worryingly, school leaders are increasingly reporting using pupil premium funding to plug other budget gaps—47% of them did so according to the most recent Sutton Trust survey, up from 23% in 2019. Local decision-making also means the Department needs to effectively support all schools to make well-informed decisions, although we can see local variances and gaps, with up to 30% of schools potentially not making use of the Education Endowment Foundation's evidence in deciding how to use their pupil premium funding.

The Department sees the government's 'Opportunities Mission' as a positive step to improve cross-government focus on tackling disadvantage, by providing a framework to bring together its own and wider government work, but it remains to be seen how this will work in practice.

Introduction

The Department for Education (the Department) has overall responsibility for the school system and early years settings. In 2023–24¹ there were 21,600 state-funded schools in England educating 7.7 million pupils, with the Department identifying 2.1 million (27%) as disadvantaged given they had been registered for free school meals in the past six years or currently, or previously, looked after by the local authority. There are also around 58,000 early years providers where the Department identified, as at January 2023, 239,000 of the 924,000 2-to-4-year-olds benefitting from government-funded early entitlements as disadvantaged.

On average, children from a disadvantaged background are less likely to perform well at school compared with their peers. The Department has a strategic priority to improve the attainment of disadvantaged children and, in 2023–24, £9.2 billion of its £60 billion school spending was intended specifically to support disadvantaged children. This includes £4.1 billion through disadvantage elements of its core funding, alongside more targeted interventions such as pupil premium, which the Department describes as its flagship policy. To measure progress, it primarily uses the disadvantage attainment gap, which compares the attainment of disadvantaged pupils against their peers at key stage 2 (primary school years 3 to 6) and key stage 4 (secondary school years 10 and 11, leading up to GCSE).

¹ In this report, central government financial years are written as, for example, 2023–24 and run from 1 April to 31 March; school academic years are written 2023/24 and run from 1 September to 31 August.

Conclusions and recommendations

- 1. The Department has made some progress improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children, but does not fully capture outcomes or breakdown performance.** Disadvantaged children continue to perform less well academically than their peers—in 2022/23, 25% of disadvantaged pupils achieved grade 5 or above in English and Maths compared with 53% for non-disadvantaged children. The disadvantage attainment gap index, the main measure of progress, has narrowed in the last two years for children leaving primary school (KS2), and very slightly in the last year for those leaving secondary school (KS4). The Department is pleased by recent improvements in overall academic attainment and committed to further improving performance. It has not, however, set out the progress it wants to make in closing the gap, and by when. The attainment gap index only considers academic performance nationally and there is not a breakdown in how this varies by local areas or different groups of children, for example, by ethnicity or gender. The Department says it considers the attainment gap alongside other measures, such as wider outcomes where it has more limited analysis, but it does not routinely bring measures together to understand and monitor the impacts of interventions and tailor its approach.

RECOMMENDATION

Within the next six months, DfE should set out and publish:

- its desired progress in narrowing the disadvantaged gap over the next three, five and ten years; and
- how it considers the attainment gap alongside other measures and data, including on educational attainment and wider outcomes, to fully assess progress for all and selected groups of disadvantaged children.

- 2. DfE continues to improve its evidence base for what works, but the rationale for certain funding decisions, in particular increasing core funding, does not always follow the evidence.** The Department has assessed its evidence base for pupil premium effectively supporting the attainment of disadvantaged children as relatively strong compared to

other interventions. However, over the period 2018–19 to 2023–24 this funding has not risen in line with inflation, decreasing by 3% in real terms with a 9% real-terms reduction in per-pupil funding. By contrast, evidence is less strong on the impact of the disadvantage and deprivation related funding provided through the National Funding Formula (the core funding)– but the Department has increased it by 10% in real terms over the same period. The Department’s rationale for these decisions is not clear. The Department accepts it needs to develop its evidence base for interventions beyond pupil premium, to help support its decisions on where to target funding to best effect.

RECOMMENDATION

Whilst continuing to build an understanding of what works, DfE should re-assess the evidence base for funding decisions and, as part of this, set out its funding priorities for 2025–26, including where pupil premium falls within this.

- 3. Early Years funding and support remains critical for disadvantaged children to have the best start in life; it will be essential that DfE builds its evidence of what works.** The value of intervening as early as possible in a child’s life is well recognised, but the Department has not reflected this in its funding even after increasing Early Years Pupil Premium by 45% for 2025–26. Previously, in 2024–25 the maximum early years pupil premium for a 3-or 4-year-old was £388, compared to £1,480 for primary school child, with the Department unable to provide a clear rationale for these differences. The Department recognises it needs to continue revisiting funding and stressed the value of evidence in doing so. However, it can take a long time to generate evidence of the longer-term impact of early years interventions. For example, the best evidence for the impact of Sure Start Centres, on later academic attainment has only recently been published. The Department will need to think about how it will collect evidence on the impact of Family Hubs support for families in disadvantaged areas, including in the early years, although they have not been in place long.

RECOMMENDATION

The Department should prioritise expanding its evidence base on the effectiveness of early years interventions, including the role of Family Hubs, and in 12 months update the Committee on the impact of its decisions to increase Early Years Pupil Premium in 2025–26. In doing so, it should set out how its approach to developing evidence and then making funding decisions will align going forwards.

4. The Department relies on schools to spend funding in line with its intended purposes but has limited understanding of whether they do so.

The Department’s policy is to allow schools and early years providers flexibility to use funding according to their local context. As such, more than 90% of the estimated £9.2 billion funding associated with disadvantage is not “ringfenced”, meaning schools can choose how they spend it. However, this also means the Department does not have a good understanding of how schools spend funding and therefore how effectively it supports the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. There is a risk that disadvantaged children may not be benefitting, with 47% of school leaders surveyed by Sutton Trust in 2024 using pupil premium to plug wider budget gaps, up from 23% in 2019. The Department does not have a systematic way to understand how pupil premium is spent, with only 80% of schools sampled in 2023 meeting the requirement to publish 2022–23 strategies setting out how they plan to use funding to improve disadvantaged children’s attainment. Also, the Department is not collecting information on whether schools are providing tutoring, now the National Tutoring Programme has ended.

RECOMMENDATION

Whilst retaining the principle of local decision-making, the Department should introduce stronger and clearer mechanisms to understand how schools spend funding. This should include:

- collecting data on where schools use disadvantaged-focused funding, including for certain interventions such as tutoring; and
- reiterating the need for schools to publish up-to-date strategies for how they plan to spend pupil premium and following up non-compliance.

5. The Department supports schools in making effective local decisions, but there remains variability in practice, performance and how schools use evidence.

The Department provides support to schools and other providers to help them effectively target their funding for disadvantaged children. This support includes a menu of evidence-based approaches for Pupil Premium, and guidance signposting the work of the Education Endowment Foundation. The Department recognises there are differences in how schools consider available evidence, and then the approaches they take to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children. It feels that schools make good use of this but also accepts it must develop the evidence base for interventions beyond pupil premium. With only 70% of school leaders saying they use Education Endowment Foundation evidence to

develop plans for spending pupil premium, there is clearly huge scope for improvement, and the Department acknowledges that this figure should be closer to 100%.

RECOMMENDATION

The Department should provide greater clarity on how it supports schools, early years providers, local authorities and academy trusts to make effective evidence-based decisions. This should include setting out how it will capture and share good practice and monitor differences.

- 6. The Department is relying on the ‘Opportunities Mission’ to bring together its own, and wider government’s, work to support disadvantaged children but it remains unclear how this will work in practice.** The Department must work with other areas of government to support disadvantaged children, such as with the Department for Work and Pensions as part of the Child Poverty Task Force. However, cross-government working has previously been challenging, in part because other parts of government may not place as high a priority on disadvantage as the Department. The Department is developing its strategy for narrowing the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers around the government’s mission “Breaking down the barriers to opportunity”, which also provides a chance to revisit how it works with others across government, particularly though shared data which is where the Department sees most scope for improvement. The Government’s Plan for Change, setting out details of its missions, was published in December 2024, meaning it is still too early to see any changes to ways of working.

RECOMMENDATION

The Department should set out how it will use the opportunities mission to further join-up data and performance information, and embed the cultural changes needed for effective cross-government working.

1 Understanding of progress, impact and decision-making

Introduction

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Department for Education (the Department) on improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children in England.²
2. The Department has overall responsibility for the school system and early years settings, ensuring value for money from the £60 billion spent across these settings. In 2023–24 there were 21,600 state-funded schools in England educating 7.7 million pupils from reception upwards. In 2023–24³ the Department assessed 2.1 million (27% of) school children as disadvantaged based on those registered for free school meals in the past six years or those who are, or have been, looked after by the local authority. There were also around 58,000 early years providers, including state-funded schools, voluntary and private providers, and childminders.⁴ The Department identified, using a broader definition, that 239,000 (26%) of the 924,000 2-to 4-year-olds who had benefitted from government-funded early years entitlements as at January 2023 were disadvantaged.⁵
3. On average, children from a disadvantaged background are less likely to perform well at school compared with their peers. The Department's main measure of progress is the disadvantage attainment gap, comparing the attainment of disadvantaged pupils against their peers when leaving

2 C&AG's Report, [Improving Educational outcomes for disadvantaged children](#), Session 2024–25, HC 125, 23 July 2024

3 In this report, central government financial years are written as, for example, 2023–24 and run from 1 April to 31 March; school academic years are written 2023/24 and run from 1 September to 31 August.

4 C&AG's Report, para 1

5 C&AG's Report, para 2

primary school after Key Stage 2, and then secondary school after Key Stage 4.⁶ The Department has a long-standing strategic priority to improve the attainment of disadvantaged children.⁷

4. In 2023–24, the Department spent an estimated £9.2 billion focused on supporting the attainment of disadvantaged children. Around half comprised the disadvantage elements of its core funding for schools, with the remainder more targeted interventions—including the pupil premium, additional funding for some local areas, and six interventions introduced since the COVID–19 pandemic which particularly impacted disadvantaged pupils.⁸
5. We received a number of written submissions from stakeholders.⁹ Particular issues and concerns drawn to our attention included:
 - a. pupil premium being used for whole school interventions, in not being ringfenced and rates not keeping up with inflation;
 - b. the need to consider other factors, such as child poverty and enrichment activities, to improve the educational attainment of disadvantaged children;
 - c. how disadvantage is measured and assessed in the school system;
 - d. the ending of the National Tutoring Programme;
 - e. limited criteria for fully funded early years support; and
 - f. the recruitment and retainment of teachers.

Progress with improving attainment

6. The Department told us there are signs that, although hard to measure, the academic attainment of all children, particularly those at primary schools, has improved over time. However, disadvantaged children continue to perform less well than their peers across all areas and school phases.¹⁰ For example, in 2022/23, the percentages reaching the expected reading and maths standards at the end of primary school were 60% and 59% respectively for disadvantaged children, compared with 78% and 79% for non-disadvantaged children.¹¹ Also, 25% of disadvantaged pupils

6 C&AG's Report, para 3

7 C&AG's Report, para 2

8 C&AG's Report, paras 2,3; C&AG's Report on [Education Recovery in Schools in England](#), session 2022–23, 1 February 2023, HC 1081, para 3.

9 Committee of Public Accounts, [Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children - written evidence](#)

10 Q 5; C&AG's Report, para 20

11 C&AG's Report, para 1.8

achieved grade 5 or above in English and Maths GCSE compared with 52% for non-disadvantaged children. Performance figures are further distorted by the relative gap in children who are entered for exams with 8.3% of disadvantaged students not being entered for English and Maths GCSEs compared with 2.3% of children who were not identified as disadvantaged. The Department expected to see recent improvements in primary school data reflected in the secondary school data as pupils move through the system.¹²

7. The Department told us that, compared to other countries, England performs relatively well in terms of disadvantaged children's attainment.¹³ The OECD recently cited the UK as one of 10 highly equitable countries, meaning that the difference in maths, science and reading results that could be explained by socioeconomic status was lower than the OECD average.¹⁴ It also found that the UK had above average proportions of "academically resilient" pupils, who were among the best academic performers but in the bottom quartile for socioeconomic background.¹⁵ The Department stressed that, while recognising this success, it must not become complacent. It described aiming to close the significant gap between children of different backgrounds and continuing to aspire for high standards for every child, although this was ambitious, and no other country had achieved this aim.¹⁶
8. The Department compares the attainment of disadvantaged pupils against their peers nationally through the disadvantage gap index, its main measure of progress.¹⁷ The Department explained that its most recent data shows this gap narrowed marginally in the last two years for children leaving primary school at key stage 2 (from 3.23 in 2021/22 to 3.13 in 2023/24) and in the last year for those leaving secondary at key stage 4 (3.94 in 2022/23 to 3.92 in 2023/24). This is starting to reverse the significant widening of the gap seen during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸ The Department sees the recent narrowing as a success but acknowledges that the gap is not closing as quickly as it would like, with some way to go to return to the pre-pandemic position.¹⁹ However, the Department has not set out the specific progress it wants to make and by when. The Department acknowledged that the index can be difficult to understand, but considered this the best measure as, being relative, it was resilient to changes in testing methods, standards, and pupil numbers.²⁰ It also acknowledged that the index did not help understand

12 Q 5

13 Q 11

14 OECD, [PISA 2022 Results: The State of Learning and Equity in Education](#), 5 December 2023

15 Q 11

16 Q 20

17 C&AG's Report, para 3, 10.

18 Q5

19 Qq 5, 6

20 C&AG's Report, para 11; Qq 8 and 10

performance variation across disadvantaged children, for example by local area, ethnicity or gender.²¹ The National Foundation of Educational Research identified that it is increasingly difficult to tell whether trends were driven by improving attainment or wider factors, with changes to the eligibility of free school meals impacting the numbers assessed as disadvantaged.²²

9. Registration for free school meals is not automatic and some low-income pupils will be missed due to eligibility criteria. This means it is imperfect as a measure of disadvantage. The Department stressed the importance of using wider measures beyond the disadvantage gap index to understand performance. This included considering the proportions of students achieving certain levels across subjects and understanding local differences by bringing together various metrics and school-level data.²³ The Department also agreed it should consider wider outcomes such as progression into work and wellbeing, alongside academic attainment. It recognises it is not performing as strongly across these areas internationally.²⁴ The Department has more limited data and analysis on wider outcomes for disadvantaged children.²⁵ It does not routinely bring measures together to understand and monitor the impacts of interventions and tailor its approach.²⁶

The basis for funding decisions

10. The Department considers it has better evidence of pupil premium effectively supporting disadvantaged children, assessing this evidence as strong, compared to that available for the disadvantage and deprivation elements of the national funding formula.²⁷ Despite this, there has been a 3% real-terms reduction in pupil premium funding over the period 2018–19 to 2023–24, with per-pupil funding falling by 9%.²⁸ The Department confirmed that pupil premium funding had not kept up with inflation.²⁹ Over the same timeframe, disadvantage and deprivation funding within the national funding formula increased by 10% in real terms, despite the evidence for effectiveness of pupil premium funding being stronger than

21 Qq 8, 9

22 [IED00020](#)

23 Qq 8, 9

24 Q 12

25 C&AG's Report, para 2.7

26 C&AG's Report, para 10, para 2.7

27 C&AG's Report, para 12

28 Q 25; C&AG's Report, para 13, para 2.14

29 Q 25

it is for funding provided through national funding formula.³⁰ In 2023–24 the Department spent £2.8 billion on pupil premium, and £4.1 billion on the disadvantage and deprivation elements of the National Funding Formula.³¹

11. The Department committed to keeping the balance of funding across different interventions under review.³² It told us that pupil premium and the disadvantage elements of the national funding formula should be considered together—with pupil premium being specifically directed towards disadvantaged children, and the funding formula using disadvantage as a proxy for wider need.³³ The Department explained that the rising incidence and complexity of special educational needs contributed to its decision to increase the disadvantage and deprivation elements of the funding formula given a significant overlap between special educational need and disadvantage.³⁴
12. The Department stressed that, without an unlimited budget, it would always need to make trade-offs in its funding decisions.³⁵ It told us it is firstly aiming to increase the proportion of funding targeted towards disadvantage, as it believes this has a greater marginal impact on outcomes for disadvantaged children.³⁶ Secondly, it planned to direct more funding towards the early years.³⁷ The Department also described considering outcomes beyond academic attainment in its funding decisions, as illustrated through a decision to invest an additional £30 million in school breakfast clubs, following EEF finding that providing breakfast for five to seven year olds led to two months or more progress in maths, reading and behaviour, and wider attendance and behaviour benefits.³⁸
13. While the Department is confident in its evidence base for pupil premium it recognised the need to continue building evidence in other areas, for example early years, and on wider outcomes beyond academic attainment such as attendance and home learning.³⁹ The Department said it was keen to have more of an evidence-based approach to how it thinks about schools policy more widely.⁴⁰ The Department outlined plans to widen its evidence base further through, for example, working with a wider range of What Works Centres as part of the Opportunities Mission and its plans to

30 Q 25; C&AG's Report, para 13

31 C&AG's Report, para 13

32 Q 26

33 Q 25

34 Q 25

35 Q 33

36 Qq 26, 32

37 Q 32

38 Q 22

39 Qq 28, 36

40 Q 37

consult experts on how gaps in the existing evidence base on areas such as attendance and home learning can be filled.⁴¹ The Department also plans to publish areas of research interest.

Investing in early years support

14. Research shows the value of early years provision in supporting the attainment of disadvantaged children. From the age of three, there is a gap in cognitive outcomes between disadvantaged children and their peers, and in 2018 the Education Policy Institute reported that, on average, disadvantaged children were 4.3 months behind their peers in the early years phase.⁴² The Department recognised the critical importance of intervening in the early years, with about 40% of the overall gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds and their peers having already emerged by age five, and these differences continuing to widen as children move through the education system.⁴³
15. Despite the recognised value, in 2024–25 the maximum pupil premium annual rate per pupil in the early years (age 3–4) was £388, compared to £1,480 for primary school pupils and £1,050 for those at secondary school. The Department has not done any analysis to explain these funding differences.⁴⁴ However, it told us it had increased the early years premium for 2025–26 by 45%, to £570, reflecting the very strong evidence base.⁴⁵ The Department acknowledged that this remained significantly lower than the primary school rate, but explained not wanting to increase the rate too quickly which could create instability in the funding system by taking money away from other areas.⁴⁶ The Department felt it had gone as far as it could, but committed to keeping the balance of funding under review, stressing the importance of matching increases in funding with the developing evidence base. Currently the evidence base for early years funding is still developing compared to that for primary and secondary school interventions.⁴⁷
16. The Department is currently extending early years entitlements so that, by September 2025, eligible working parents with a child aged nine months and above will be entitled to 30 hours of early years childcare a week.⁴⁸ The Department acknowledged the new entitlements focused on working families, but did not agree this could create disadvantages for

41 Q 36

42 C&AG's Report, para 2.16

43 Qq 5, 6

44 C&AG's Report, para 14

45 Q 22

46 Q 46

47 Qq 28, 46

48 C&AG's Report, para 2.17

those children with unemployed parents. The Department pointed to the universal 15-hour entitlement for all three and four-year-olds, where it had seen an increase in take up. It also described the childcare entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds, and the early years pupil premium.⁴⁹ The Department hoped this additional funding would encourage settings to accept disadvantaged children alongside those with working parents receiving entitlements.⁵⁰

17. The Department told us that its childcare policy aimed to support child development and school readiness, alongside enabling parents to work, with supporting parents at home an important element.⁵¹ ‘Family hubs’, funded jointly with the Department for Health and Social Care, will be targeted in disadvantaged areas and aim to support parents.⁵² The Department stressed that family hubs are a relatively new initiative, but described seeing some early evidence of their impact. For example, Doncaster has seen a 1.06 times improvement in children reaching the early years foundation stage profile by age five.⁵³ However, the Department could not yet say whether family hubs were as effective as Sure Start in supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds, in part as the impacts on GCSE attainment from Sure Start have taken some time to crystallise, with the best evidence only emerging recently.⁵⁴ The Department said it had, however used evidence from Sure Start to design the family hubs programme, for example in choosing to focus the hubs in disadvantaged areas.⁵⁵ The Department noted there was a lot of enthusiasm for family hubs and expanding them would be an area for Ministers to consider.⁵⁶

49 Qq 27, 47

50 Q 47

51 Q 47

52 Qq 34, 47

53 Q 50

54 Qq 48, 50

55 Q 48

56 Q 49

2 Understanding spending and the support needed across providers

Understanding how funds are spent

18. The Department’s policy is to allow schools and other providers autonomy and flexibility to support disadvantaged children in a way that suits local circumstances and their pupils’ needs. More than 90% of the estimated £9.2 billion funding associated with disadvantage is not “ringfenced”. Schools can choose how to spend this money which may be on wider priorities or teachers’ pay. They need not spend it in a way that benefits disadvantaged pupils.⁵⁷ However, the Department does not have a good understanding of how schools spend most disadvantage related funding, or a systemic way to understand, for example, how schools spend pupil premium.⁵⁸
19. We challenged the Department on Sutton Trust research from 2024 which found 47% of senior school leaders surveyed were using pupil premium to plug gaps in their budget, up from 23% in 2019.⁵⁹ The Department said school leaders could still be using this funding on areas that have a good impact for disadvantaged children, such as high-quality teaching. The Education Endowment Foundation found good teachers benefited all pupils, but disadvantaged pupils more. The Department noted that spending funding on teaching aligned with the pupil premium aims, which may be more effective than individual, targeted, or smaller interventions.⁶⁰ The National Association of Virtual School Heads told us that many schools were reporting using pupil premium for whole school interventions rather than supporting individual children, which the association felt was better.⁶¹

57 C&AG’s Report, para 3.2

58 C&AG’s Report, para 16, 17

59 Qq 23–24, 53; The Sutton Trust, School Funding and Pupil Premium Report 2024, 19 April 2024

60 Qq 53, 56

61 [IED00018](#)

- 20.** The Department told us that schools valued the freedom to choose how they managed their budgets but said this did not mean a lack of accountability for spending. It described understanding that schools, particularly poorer performers, may divert funding for disadvantaged children to other areas. However, it believed that setting clear expectations, through an accountability system, supported schools to make good choices.⁶²
- 21.** In terms of accountability for pupil premium, the Department described schools needing to clearly report how they used funding so governors could use this to provide challenge.⁶³ All schools must publish an up-to-date pupil premium strategy statement setting out their spending plans. The Department acknowledged that its data showed that not all schools were complying. In 2023, only 80% of schools sampled had published a 2022–23 pupil premium statement.⁶⁴ The Department said it had followed up with those who had not published a statement, and they should now be updating and publishing their statements. However, as checks were completed on a sample basis it could not commit to following up with all those not complying.⁶⁵
- 22.** The Department does not know how much schools spend on tutoring despite having strong evidence of its value, as it no-longer provides specific funding. With the National Tutoring Programme not continuing into 2024/25, schools must decide whether to fund this themselves.⁶⁶ The Department explained that it had planned for the programme to last four years (to 2024/25) to address learning lost during the COVID–19 pandemic, with tutoring then being covered by mainstream funding.⁶⁷ The Department expected many schools would want to continue tutoring, building on the clear benefits from upskilling staff and creating trained tutors, which could be funded through pupil premium.⁶⁸ The Department told us this had been reflected in its updated pupil premium guidance and the “menu of evidence” available to schools to help them decide how to spend this funding.⁶⁹ It explained that schools should follow their evidence as tutoring may not be the best approach for all children.⁷⁰ The Department’s risk register has identified the need to promote the benefits of using pupil premium to fund

62 Qq 24, 54

63 Qq 24, 53

64 C&AG’s Report, para 17, Q55

65 Qq 57–58

66 C&AG’s Report, para 15

67 Q 23

68 Qq 23, 24, 29

69 Qq 23, 24

70 Q 29

tutoring.⁷¹ It has committed to tracking its use and impact going forward.⁷² We heard from various stakeholders about the value of a national tutoring programme.⁷³

Supporting decisions in schools

- 23.** The Department stressed to us the importance of schools and other providers being able to spend funding effectively.⁷⁴ The Department has expanded the support provided to schools to help them decide how to spend pupil premium funding. This includes signposting schools to the work of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), one of government’s designated What Works Centres.⁷⁵ In relation to pupil premium, the Department stressed that it asked schools to spend funding through evidence-based interventions using EEF’s toolkit that provided a clear guide to schools. The toolkit recommended that about a half of pupil premium be spent on high-quality teaching, a quarter on individual-level targeted interventions and a quarter on supporting wider outcomes such as attendance.⁷⁶ The Department also described providing guidance to help schools develop mandatory pupil premium statements, amending the template to encourage adding links to evidence, and providing a “menu” of evidence-based approaches to consider.⁷⁷ It said that most of the statements it had sampled linked back to the evidence base.⁷⁸
- 24.** The Department told us it monitors how well school leaders use pupil premium evidence, with 69% of school leaders saying they used EEF resources in its most recent survey.⁷⁹ It believed this may be understated, as a higher proportion of the pupil premium statements it reviewed linked back to EEF evidence.⁸⁰ Although it described 70% as a reasonable proportion of school leaders, the Department acknowledged this figure should be closer to 100% and that 30% of schools potentially not using evidence was worrying. It committed to looking at this.⁸¹ The Department noted that the EEF is keen to make sure schools have access to the latest evidence, and that this can be easily shared and adopted in classrooms.⁸²

71 Q 24

72 Q29

73 [IEDO0005](#), [IEDO0007](#), [IEDO0015](#), [IEDO0017](#),

74 Q 32

75 C&AG’s Report, para 3.6

76 Qq 7, 24, 25

77 C&AG’s Report, para 16, Para 3.6

78 Q 55

79 Qq 37, 55

80 Qq 37, 59–60

81 Qq 55, 60

82 Q 37

25. The Department recognises there are differences in how schools consider available evidence, and then the approaches they take to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children.⁸³ The Department acknowledged that it needed to strengthen its support, beyond funding, for those schools not performing, including those needing further support to make decisions or facing high levels of poverty.⁸⁴ It told us that its RISE teams, which bring together civil servants and expert advisers, would support schools where academic results suggested difficulties, or Ofsted had concerns. Support would be provided earlier than waiting for a formal departmental intervention to change leadership and governance.⁸⁵ The Department said these teams would help schools make improvements based on good practice, and work alongside local authorities and academy trusts who have a role in sharing good practice.⁸⁶ The Department also highlighted the extra support available to Priority Education Investment Areas, 24 local authorities with high levels of disadvantage and low levels of attainment. This included additional funding, and more schools being eligible for targeted teacher retention incentives.⁸⁷

The Opportunities mission

26. The Department recognises the importance of cross-government working to improving outcomes for disadvantaged children, as a wide range of factors outside school influence children's attainment. This includes housing, health and socio-economic deprivation. It described working across government, including through a critical partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on the Child Poverty Taskforce.⁸⁸ However the Department also recognised that cross-government working is more challenging where, as has been the case, departments do not have a shared aim bringing together their work.⁸⁹ The Department explained that departments talk to each other, but in having different priorities, it can be challenging to get things done.⁹⁰ The previous Public Accounts Committee has recognised the value of cross government working to the successful delivery of many government policies and programmes, with a common purpose and shared vision a crucial factor.⁹¹

83 Q 9

84 Q 38

85 Qq 30, 39, 40

86 Q 41

87 Q 39

88 Q 34

89 Q34; C&AG's Report, para 9, 1.18-1.20

90 Q 34

91 Committee of Public Accounts, [Cross-Government Working](#), Twelfth report of session 2023-24, HC 75, 13 February 2024

27. Looking ahead, the Department explained that its forward plan and strategy for supporting disadvantaged children would be focussed around government’s mission to “Break down barriers to opportunity.”⁹² The Department explained that this is summarised in the government’s Plan for Change, published in December 2024.⁹³ This “mission-led” approach would also improve cross-government working by allowing and encouraging the Department to think holistically across the system, using evidence of what works across different areas, such as with analysis on housing, child poverty and health. The Department also felt the Opportunities mission would create a single shared aim for government to work towards. The benefits were already being seen in the joint Child Poverty Taskforce and closer working with the Department for Health and Social Care on the “best start for life” element of the Opportunities mission, and family hub support.⁹⁴
28. The Department explained how single shared priorities also helped evaluate programmes objectively but acknowledged it would like to go further through joining up data and information, which the Opportunities mission could help give impetus to. It said it had made some progress, but felt that there was more to do to, for example, better sharing of data between education, health and justice which continued to be a particular challenge.⁹⁵
29. Alongside better cross-government working, the Department believed a mission-led approach would benefit its own strategic thinking, with the opportunities mission now forming the organising principle for its work.⁹⁶ The Department told us it is already beginning to see an impact through how it prioritises work, with early years now a greater priority in line with the government’s Plan for Change on the best start in life.⁹⁷ In providing a clear organising structure, the Department believed the mission would also lead to improved decisions on business planning and allocating resources.⁹⁸

92 Prime Minister’s Office, [Break Down Barriers to Opportunity](#),

93 Q 31; HM Government, [Plan for Change](#), 5 December 2024

94 Q 34

95 Q 35

96 Q 31

97 Q 31

98 Q 31

Formal minutes

Thursday 13 February 2025

Members present

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, in the Chair

Mr Clive Betts

Anna Dixon

Peter Fortune

Rachel Gilmour

Lloyd Hatton

Declaration of interests

The following declarations of interest relating to the inquiry were made:

13 January 2025

The Chair declared the following interest: daughter participated in Teach First programme

Anna Dixon declared the following interest: worked with Juliet Chua when she was at department for health and has a personal association with Tony Foot's wife.

Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children

Draft Report (*Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 29 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Thirteenth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned till Thursday 27 February at 9.30 a.m.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Monday 13 January 2025

Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education;
Tony Foot, Director General for Strategy, Department for Education;
Juliet Chua CB, Director General for Schools, Department for Education

[Q1-64](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

IEDO numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Brennan, Dr Victoria (Senior Lecturer in Teacher Education, Liverpool John Moores University); Goodwin, Mrs Menna (Project Manager, Liverpool John Moores University) Mallaburn, Dr Andrea (Reader in Science Education, Liverpool John Moores University); McDonald, Dr Rory (Postdoctoral Research Associate, Liverpool John Moores University); and Seton, Professor Linda (Professor of Chemistry Education and Crystallisation, Liverpool John Moores University); [IEDO0021](#)
- 2 Blakey, Dr Emma (Senior Lecturer, University of Sheffield) [IEDO0012](#)
- 3 Bond, Professor Caroline [IEDO0003](#)
- 4 Cook, Mr Nigel D (Expert Business Efficiency Identification, Management and Delivery, Expert Business Efficiency Identification, Management and Delivery) [IEDO0001](#)
- 5 Carers Trust [IEDO0016](#)
- 6 Child Poverty Action Group [IEDO0013](#)
- 7 Community Schools Trust [IEDO0006](#)
- 8 Early Education and Childcare Coalition [IEDO0019](#)
- 9 Fair Education Alliance [IEDO0017](#)
- 10 Leeds Trinity University; and University of Leeds [IEDO0028](#)
- 11 Magic Breakfast [IEDO0025](#)
- 12 National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) [IEDO0018](#)
- 13 National Foundation for Educational Research [IEDO0020](#)
- 14 Outhwaite, Dr Laura (Principal Research Fellow, UCL Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities) [IEDO0009](#)
- 15 Pupils 2 Parliament [IEDO0026](#)
- 16 Speech and Language UK [IEDO0010](#)

17	Teach First	<u>IEDO0011</u>
18	Team Up for social mobility	<u>IEDO0005</u>
19	The BUSY Group	<u>IEDO0015</u>
20	The Centre for Young Lives	<u>IEDO0022</u>
21	The Duke of Edinburgh's Award	<u>IEDO0014</u>
22	The Manchester Metropolitan University	<u>IEDO0002</u>
23	The National Education Union	<u>IEDO0024</u>
24	The Sutton Trust	<u>IEDO0007</u>
25	The University of Manchester	<u>IEDO0008</u>

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2024–25

Number	Title	Reference
12th	Crown Court backlogs	HC 348
11th	Excess votes 2023-24	HC 719
10th	HS2: Update following the Northern leg cancellation	HC 357
9th	Tax evasion in the retail sector	HC 355
8th	Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage	HC 351
7th	Asylum accommodation: Home Office acquisition of former HMP Northeye	HC 361
6th	DWP Customer Service and Accounts 2023-24	HC 354
5th	NHS financial sustainability	HC 350
4th	Tackling homelessness	HC 352
3rd	HMRC Customer Service and Accounts	HC 347
2nd	Condition and maintenance of Local Roads in England	HC 349
1st	Support for children and young people with special educational needs	HC 353