Fair Education
Manifesto 2023

Achieving a fair education in England

About the Fair Education Alliance

The Fair Education Alliance is a coalition of 250 of England's leading organisations from business, the third sector and education, all working towards a world where our education system is fair – where no child's educational success is limited by their socio-economic background. This is a world where disadvantage no longer determines literacy and numeracy rates at primary school, GCSE attainment at secondary school, the emotional wellbeing and resilience of young people, participation in further education or employment-based training, or university admissions.

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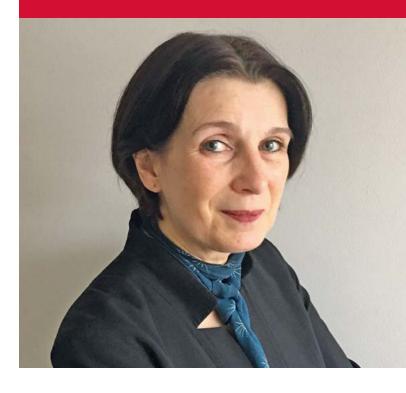
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Introduction from the Chair
Dr Vanessa Ogden

As we look towards the forthcoming General Election of 2024, the 250 organisations of the Fair Education Alliance stand together behind the vision and recommendations set out in this manifesto.

We urge policymakers to make this manifesto an essential read as they set out their pledges for education, placing it front and centre of their priorities and recognising the foundational role that any education system plays in creating a strong and prosperous society, with human well-being at its heart.

In our manifesto, we set out the current reality for significant numbers of children and young people today – that gaps between richer and poorer children and young people are at their highest points in over a decade at the end of primary, at GCSE, and in progression to university. We also set out what is needed to change this for the better. This document provides an off-the-shelf guide for policymakers to direct their strategy for education. Our manifesto has been developed with central input from the practitioners, businesses, school leaders, young people and education policy experts who make up the Fair Education Alliance coalition.

Not all we set out in our manifesto requires financial investment: some of it is already being delivered for some young people, in some areas, but not equally for all across the country. We need to see more consistency of area provision, longer term policy commitment to place-based change and targeted place-based investment that supports schools to deal successfully with structural social inequalities like hunger, health poverty and poor home resources.

Nevertheless, there are inevitably costs involved in many aspects of this manifesto. The Fair Education Alliance is up front on this. We have seen the well-being and education of children and young people deprioritised politically for many years in party manifestoes. Basic needs like hunger and digital devices to do homework are unmet, recruitment of effective teachers, school leaders and support staff is low, quality early years education and care is difficult to find, and young people struggle to have their achievements recognised fairly in an assessment system that, for many, is not fit for purpose within a competitive global economy. That we still fail to provide appropriately for high quality technical and skills-based education in a world that needs great technical innovators, engineers, producers, trades and entrepreneurs is a fundamental issue.

At a time when there are high demands on the public purse, we must recognise that education is central to everything we want our country to achieve: to have a workforce with the skills employers and society need, to have an informed and thoughtful electorate, and to have a fairer and more just society where every child has access to the makings of a good life. Children are our future – our most important assets are our people, and our priority should be to invest in them at the early stages of their lives – equally, consistently, and coherently in every region according to need. Cross-sector alliance on this was never more important in a competitive global context.

Thank you for joining us – and making meaningful investment in education, children and young people an election priority.
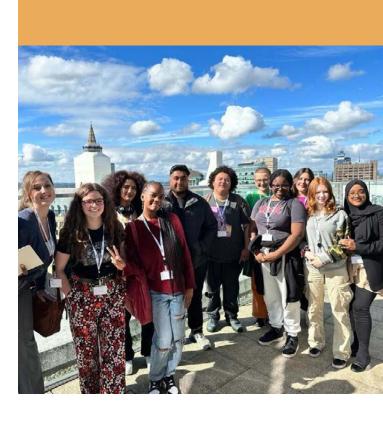
Dr Vanessa Ogden

FEA Youth Steering Group Statement of Support

Politicians from across the political spectrum often visit schools and refer to 'future generations' in their speeches. But now we, the Fair Education Alliance Youth Steering Group, are calling on the next government to make a concrete commitment to invest time, resources and money into us and our education.

As highlighted in this Fair Education Manifesto, a vital element of tackling inequality is supporting the systems and the workforces established to help children and young people. Underfunding these services is not only harming the young people who are in need of them, but also has broader societal implications. The next generation, whether they aspire to be teachers, lawyers, doctors, construction workers, entrepreneurs, or more, need an environment conducive to thriving. However, we know that right now so many young people are just barely surviving. Fundamentally, that shouldn't be the goal -- or their reality.

When looking at how to support young people, the education system is crucial. How young people are taught impacts how we work, how we value ourselves and others, our ambitions and our access to opportunities. Given how early in a child's life inequalities and attainment gaps with their wealthier peers emerge, tackling inequality in education is a crucial step in addressing widespread inequality.

The inequality within the education system has only become more prevalent in recent years, and for over a decade the needs, wants and overall influence of young people have been missing in efforts to rectify this. To make progress towards a fairer society, it is essential that young people are part of the decisions that are going to affect them. Unfortunately, too often young people are overlooked in decision making about their futures and this is only exacerbated for marginalised young people. This has far-reaching consequences and has a significant impact on the society we live in today.

If we hope to solve the world's most important social issues, we need to make sure that all ideas from under-represented groups are heard and given the power to articulate their voices to foster change in and around their communities.

It is therefore essential that the next government consistently and meaningfully involves young people in designing solutions to tackle inequalities in education. We have a right to be heard and taken seriously, and as the ones experiencing the education system daily, we can use our experiences to shape effective and impactful change. It is only through collectively working together, young people and adults in partnership, that we can move towards a country where every child, no matter their identity or background, has access to a fair education that enables them to develop the skills they need for the life they want. To achieve this, we must build an education system that recognises the systemic injustices that the system was built upon and understands the complexities of an individual's idea of success and what they need to excel in their life.

This manifesto lays out a clear path for tackling educational inequality by putting the needs of children and young people first. As the Fair Education Alliance Youth Steering Group, we have been involved in shaping the policy recommendations included in this manifesto and support them all. Together, we are collectively advocating for a holistic approach to supporting every student, one which takes into consideration every aspect of a young person's life, both in and outside school, and actively takes steps to dismantle systems of inequality.

Executive Summary

Our collective, cross-sector vision for building a fairer system that supports every child to thrive

The Fair Education Alliance brings together 250 organisations to achieve a future where every child gets a great education regardless of their socio-economic status. Our members - businesses, charities and social enterprises, think tanks, unions, universities and schools – work with children and young people from cradle to career in over half the education settings, and in all Local Authorities, in England. Despite their diverse backgrounds, they are united under a shared vision for what our country needs to prosper.

This is a moment of high stakes for our country: as we approach a General Election, we also face a climate crisis, a cost-of-living crisis, and threats to global peace. But, to face any of these issues in a meaningful way, we must start with education, and we must have cooperation between business, civil society and government, both at a national and local level.

Education is a crucial foundation to everything we want for our future, from widening employment and economic opportunity[1], to reducing crime[2], to improving health outcomes.[3] We will rely on today's young people to help solve some of the greatest challenges humans have yet been faced with.

And yet, education is not at the forefront of policy. Even with schools literally crumbling amidst the RAAC scandal and the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their wealthier peers at its highest point on record[4], education fails to get prominence. This must change. We must stop reacting exclusively to today's crises and set our country up for success tomorrow.

We know, from the expertise across our membership, what's needed as a priority:

Stabilise the school workforce. (p.15)

This is foundational to any other solution and will need to be addressed not only through pay, but also through culture and conditions that are more inclusive and competitive, and through easing accountability pressures.

- Develop a sustainable funding plan to make staff pay fair and more competitive over the long-term

- Reduce teacher and leader workload and stress through a fairer and more supportive accountability system that recognises the complexities of serving disadvantaged children

- Develop a strategy, with appropriate resourcing, to make the profession more inclusive, including through greater flexibility and measures to increase racial diversity and retention of working mothers, including training and mentoring, and accountability measures for schools and trusts to ensure these are implemented

Rebalance our systems to value skills and wellbeing alongside attainment. (p.18)

Young people aren't getting the skills employers say they need[5], and they're not having a positive experience of school either[6]. We need thoughtful, gradual changes to our system to deliver greater skills, wellbeing and inclusion.

- Review the curriculum, teaching, and experiences students access to ensure essential skills and physical and emotional health are developed alongside academic and foundational skills.

- Modernise our assessment system – our means of assessment must be more relevant to the world we live in and allow a broad range of young people to showcase their strengths. However, we must be vigilant that these changes don't give wealthier young people an even bigger advantage.

- Work across agencies to collect comprehensive data on the wellbeing of young people, so local governments, schools, the third sector, and funding bodies can better understand where investment is needed and what's working for improving wellbeing.

- Give a diversity of young people the opportunity to meaningfully participate in decisions impacting their education.

✏️ Deliver a quality early years education for every child. (p. 20)

Children from lower-income families are more likely to be behind expected language and development levels when they start school[7]. We must make early childhood education and care ('ECEC') accessible to every child, regardless of their family's circumstances or their SEND status. This education will support children to build relationships and skills they'll draw on for the rest of their lives. This requires strategies for increasing supply to lower-income communities and building a strong and sustained workforce.

- Introduce universally funded hours for all children, regardless of whether their parents are in work, from the end of parental leave to the start of primary school, ensuring that serving low-income communities is financially viable. If needed, low-income parents should be prioritised for funded hours.

- Bring the Early Years Pupil Premium in line with that for primary pupils and increase the Disability Access Fund to remove barriers to nurseries providing places to low-income and disabled children.

- Raise the quality of the ECEC provision that all disadvantaged children receive, including through an expansion of maintained settings, support for weaker PVI (Private, Voluntary and Independent) settings to improve, and support for building great home learning environments.

- Develop a strategy to broaden and strengthen the ECEC workforce, including creative solutions for entry points into the profession, support for young people who have not achieved the relevant academic benchmarks, provision of continuing professional development and progression, and building respect and professionalism for the profession, across all settings.

- Reduce the complexity of provision and funding, particularly to remove barriers to understanding and accessing available provision for lower-income parents and those who speak English as an additional language.

🪙 Better fund and join-up the services around families. (p.23)

Rising child poverty and a lack of investment in the services that support families have led to schools, especially those serving children with more complex needs, filling gaps left by others. This is not sustainable for schools or the families they serve. We need better funding for locally delivered services; we also need clearer responsibilities and communication channels between agencies. Further, we need funding restored to the streams intended to mitigate the impacts of poverty on education.

- : Improved funding for early intervention children's services, including children's mental health support[8], children's social care[9], and other locally delivered services[10], to ensure that every child is safe and well. This should include a plan for sustaining funding into the future.

- Agree shared outcomes across the public services and organisations supporting children and families locally. This should be supported by joined-up joined-up strategies and plans at a national level for securing the best outcomes for disadvantaged young people everywhere.

- Use a unique child number across all public services to support communication and awareness across services.

- Roll out Family Hubs nationally, with an analysis of what gaps exist in serving the full remit of 0-19-year-olds, and a plan for addressing these.

- Bolster the funding streams meant to mitigate the impacts of poverty on education, **including:**

  - Extending Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility to all children whose families are eligible for universal credit, with automatic enrolment of those eligible.

  - Indexing of FSM funding to inflation.

  - Restoring Pupil Premium funding to 2015-2016 rates, with a guarantee that this will rise with inflation in the future.

  - Extending the Pupil Premium to early years (at the primary rate) and 16-19 education (at the secondary rate).

The education system is suffering from a long-term lack of public investment, driving a wedge between schools serving poorer and wealthier pupils. Teacher and school leader recruitment are each at their lowest rate, and attrition at their highest rate[11], and this is more severe in schools serving the poorest communities[12]. Attendance is also a growing concern, with one in five pupils persistently absent in the last school year[13] — the root causes of which are complex.

Further, our system is failing to prepare young people, especially disadvantaged young people, to thrive in work and life. Disadvantaged young people are more than twice as likely to not be in education, employment, or training than their wealthier peers[14]. Low qualifications and skills are key drivers of youth employment[15] — our education system must help close the employment gap.

Outside the school gates, child poverty continues to rise, leaving more children with insecure housing, not enough food, and without the supplies and resources to fully participate in school;[16] the services to support families in poverty lack funding and a holistic strategy, and there's a lack of support for families with the least resources to give their children the foundations they need to succeed at school. There is also a growing mental health crisis for children and young people, without sufficient services to support them.[17] The schools serving those in greatest need are plugging the gaps, but it cannot continue like this.

What does this look like in numbers? The attainment gaps between disadvantaged young people and their wealthier peers were widening before the pandemic, and following Covid and the present cost-of-living crisis, they're wider than ever at every stage:

The gaps at a glance

Early Years: Disadvantaged reception-age children are an average of 4.6 months behind their better-off peers.[18]

Primary: The disadvantage gap index, used by government to track the gap between poorer and better-off pupils, stands at 3.21, the highest point in over a decade.[19]

GCSE: The disadvantage gap index stands at 3.76 (or a gap of 1.34 grades), the highest gap in over a decade.[20]

A-Level: Disadvantaged young people are an average 3.1 grades behind their non-disadvantaged peers.[21]

University: The gap in progression rates between disadvantaged pupils and others increased 20.2 percentage points, the highest recorded level. The gap in progression to high-tariff universities is also at its highest recorded level – 9.3 percentage points.[22]

Skills: Individuals who attended independent or selective state schools were more likely to have above-median skills scores (55% and 52%, respectively) than those who attended non-selective state schools (49%); individuals with at least one parent who attended university were also more likely to have higher-than-median skill scores (54% versus 49%).[23]

Employment: Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are 19 percentage points more likely to not be in education, employment or training (33% versus 14%).[24]

Closing these gaps is central to our work, and to reverse the present trend, we need sustained attention to their root causes.

Building a more equal and more prosperous future isn't a fantasy. It will require unprecedented collaboration across sectors, as well as a long-term commitment to a system that helps every child thrive. This work is the reason we exist, and we look forward to working with policymakers to make this future a reality.

Stabilising the school workforce

The problem

What has long been called a teacher recruitment and retention crisis has now undeniably grown to that level. New school workforce data for the 2021-22 academic year[25] shows that 39,930 teachers (8.8 % of the sector) left state schools - the highest number since the census began in 2010-11. The picture is no better for head teachers: 1,694 left (7.7 %) for reasons other than retirement – the highest on record.

A strong workforce is essential in an education system that delivers opportunity, and the skills to succeed in work and life, for every child. Without great teachers and teaching assistants in every classroom, we cannot deliver on the vision we lay out here – whether it be a rounded curriculum that supports pupil wellbeing and the development of skills or closing the attainment gap. And yet, we've seen our education workforce reaching increasing levels of crisis. This is now truly a 'school gates' issue: parents, who may have previously been insulated from turbulence within a school, will have noticed their child's teacher changing, increased use of supply teachers, or their child's school being closed or disrupted due to strikes.

The teacher recruitment and retention crisis has various drivers, including pay, workload, stress, and the changing nature of competing career options.[26] Although the recent pay settlement seems to have ended industrial action for now, experts believe that this settlement is unlikely to have a significant impact on supply issues on its own.[27] The issue of pay is even more severe for support staff, who can often make a higher salary in unskilled jobs such as retail.[28] We cannot expect potential school staff to choose a career that, increasingly, doesn't enable them to make ends meet and isn't competitive with other professions.

Equally significant drivers of the teacher recruitment and retention crisis are workload and workplace autonomy. Teachers experience higher workload and lower workplace autonomy than other professions, which are each associated with job satisfaction and retention.[29] The work and stress resulting from the perceived need to serve our high-stakes accountability system is a huge burden. In a recent survey by the National Education Union, 48 % of respondents said that workload is unmanageable, either most of the time or all of the time, and more than a third said they are stressed 80 % or more of the time. 79 % of respondents thought that a reformed inspection system would have a 'big positive impact'.[30] Further, job quality has been found to be worse in schools expecting an Ofsted inspection, and in schools located in areas of high social deprivation.[31]

Our accountability system should support and incentivise schools to better meet the needs of all children, but it currently poses a disincentive to teaching in challenging contexts. Aside from inspections being more frequent in schools serving disadvantaged communities,[32] there is also a direct correlation between poorer Ofsted judgments and higher rates of students eligible for free school meals or with low prior attainment. In other words, the evidence shows that judgements might be reflecting student context rather than the quality of the education that school delivers. At its worst, this can weigh against a truly inclusive school environment and cause school leaders to see students with complex needs as risks to results.

Schools serving students with complex needs are often going above and beyond to fill gaps left by other underfunded services. This work not only heightens the stress and workload of teachers serving some of the poorest communities, it's also not always valued by our accountability measures, creating further barriers to recruitment and retention for the most challenged schools

Further, the employment landscape has changed dramatically in the last decade, making careers in other industries more flexible.[33] This too has posed an obstacle to recruitment and retention – particularly of the mid-career women who are the bedrock of the teaching workforce.[34] With 77 % of classroom teachers female, and in a world where women still do the majority of parenting and domestic labour[35], a failure to accommodate the needs of working parents has had serious consequences. Further, even those current and prospective teachers without children will be presented with more flexible and less demanding employment options. Some will choose teaching because they feel it is their calling; however, a national workforce cannot be built solely on those willing to put passion ahead of practical realities.

We must also do more to ensure that we aren't losing great people because they don't feel welcome in schools. Currently, only 15 % of teachers, 7 % of primary heads and 9 % of secondary heads are from an ethnic minority background[36], when 20 % of the current working age population[37] and 34 % of the pupil population in state schools are from an ethnic minority background[38]. We are failing to attract, retain, and progress teachers of colour at a time when we desperately need teachers. Additionally, there is evidence that children attain better outcomes when taught by a teacher from their own racial or ethnic background[39]. Not only is a lack of diversity hampering our ability to attract and keep the number of teachers we need, it also may be missing an opportunity to maximise the academic potential of every child.

The teacher recruitment and retention challenges felt nationally have an even more devastating impact on schools already facing the greatest barriers. Schools serving high levels of Free School Meals-eligible pupils struggle to recruit more than others. That means they spend more on average on recruitment costs and supply to fill gaps.[40] Pupils in those schools are more likely to be taught by non-specialist teachers.[41] Further, positive relationships with teachers are positively correlated with positive academic outcomes, particularly for pupils with complex needs.[42] When there's heavy turnover or use of supply, children can fail to form bonds that are essential to their engagement with and success at school.

The solution

We need a profession that can attract and retain great talent – right across the country – in today's world. Teachers must be compensated fairly, with a long-term strategy to keep salaries competitive, including a consideration of the evidence for targeting bursaries by geography, subject and phase.

But at least as important is a reduction in workload and stress – particularly for those teaching in and leading schools serving the poorest communities. Teachers and school leaders report that our accountability system is a major driver of workload and stress; the stakes of a school inspection should be proportionate to the value it delivers, and currently the value of an Ofsted inspection does not justify the stress it creates in school staff. Our inspectorate should facilitate support for the issues it identifies, and to the extent that inspections are used to drive behaviours, these behaviours should lead to the best possible outcomes for all students. First, inspections should focus on whether the school has created inclusive environments, and schools that engage every child in learning should be celebrated. Second, our accountability system should encourage schools to work collaboratively rather than competitively with other schools in their local area -- shared local outcomes could help incentivise this collaboration. Further, a school's data should be compared to similar schools whose students are more likely to face the same needs and challenges, so any support offered is right for that school.

We must also recognise the immense challenges facing schools whose communities are struggling to stay safe, fed, and housed. We should celebrate and reward the work of teachers and leaders who go above and beyond to support these families, while acknowledging that they should not have to. (We discuss the join up and funding of the services around families **here**.

Finally, we must make a real cultural shift to ensure that we are attracting and retaining great potential teachers, regardless of their background or circumstances. Greater availability of flexible and part-time working is part of this, as it will keep teaching more competitive with other professions whilst better accommodating the needs of parents, carers, and people with disabilities. We also need strategies for improving racial diversity and retaining working mothers in the workforce. School and trust staff training on inclusive practices should underpin this work, as should a greater sharing of best practice from a range of contexts. Schools will also need adequate funding to employ the necessary staff to support flexibility and mentor peers. With these resources, schools and trusts should publish data on diversity and actions to improve it, as the National Foundation for Educational Research have recommended.[43] Further, our accountability system – including multi-academy trust accountability – should review whether schools have built an inclusive culture that values and meets the needs of its staff.

To bolster the teaching workforce and ensure there is a great teacher in every school and in every subject, **we need:**

- A sustainable funding plan to make staff pay fair and more competitive over the long-term.

- A reduction in teacher and leader workload and stress through a fairer and more supportive accountability system that recognises the complexities of serving disadvantaged children.

- A strategy, with appropriate resourcing, to make the profession more inclusive, including through greater flexibility and measures to increase racial diversity and retention of working mothers, such as training and mentoring, and accountability measures for schools and trusts to ensure these are implemented.

Rebalancing our systems to value skills and wellbeing alongside attainment

The problem

There are issues in the education system -- namely the workforce -- that must be dealt with urgently. But the FEA is clear that our education system is not working for every child and needs longer-term systemic changes. If the core purpose of education is to prepare every young person, no matter their background, for work and life, we believe we must value their wellbeing, skills and inclusion alongside academic attainment. This goal will take considered planning and phased implementation.

How we conceive of 'good results' and how we define school success are often synonymous with attainment as measured by exams, narrowing our focus to a few academic subjects.[44] Closing the attainment gap is fundamental to our mission, but our disproportionate focus on results in a few subjects is hampering the outcomes we want to see for all young people.

First, our education system isn't currently supporting young people to build the skills that we know employers want, like communication, teamwork, and problem solving[45], and disadvantaged young people have more gaps in such skills than their wealthier peers. Even when they progress to university or enter employment, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to succeed once they get there, with higher drop-out rates at university[46] and lower average salaries in employment.[47] Further, recent labour market data[48] shows that unemployment is rising for young people despite high vacancies, confirming that skills shortages are a barrier.

Our current system is still largely based on the National Curriculum, introduced 35 years ago, and General Certificates of Education, introduced over 60 years ago. From social media to AI, today's labour market and daily life would be incomprehensible to the policymakers who crafted what schools currently deliver. Our curriculum, and how we assess learning, must be fit to prepare today's children for the world they will enter and the changes they are likely to face in the future.

Currently, the skills employers lack are either technical – specific skills like auditing and accounting, or transferable – essential skills like communication and leadership. Neither of these are currently being prioritised within the education system, and young people have low confidence that their school is supporting them to build the skills they need for the future.[49] Essential skills are also especially important in preparing for the jobs of tomorrow, as they are key to adapting to rapid change.[50, 51] AI is just one example of the seismic changes happening to jobs market and to society; we must ensure that unpredictable and rapid changes to the employment landscape don't multiply existing inequalities.

In addition to the curriculum not sufficiently building these skills, young people aren't being offered sufficient opportunities outside of the curriculum: 66% of young people can't recall doing any work experience from the ages of 16-18[52]. Those disadvantaged young people that do access work experience are less likely to have a 'higher status' placement in a professional setting than their wealthier peers[53].

Further, access to extracurricular activities, which are a key way of building new skills, varies by socioeconomic status, with wealthier children being more likely to take part in every type of activity, and independent schools offering a significantly wider range of activities compared to the state sector.[54]

At the same time, too many pupils in our current system have a poor conception of their own abilities[55] and too many teachers in schools serving such pupils feel demoralised.[56] We're failing to build on a range of strengths and skills that young people might bring to the table. How we conceive of the purpose of education, and how we measure success, must be broadened and made relevant for all the young people we serve. The education system should strengthen rather than worsen the mental health of children and young people by giving them a sense of belonging and opportunities to develop their passions; unfortunately, that's not currently the case.[57] Young people want their views and contributions to matter, but they don't currently feel listened to by the systems that serve them.[58] Further, we now know that social, emotional, and mental health needs are contributing to heightened absence rates, especially amongst disadvantaged pupils.[59]

The solution

These gaps between what we want education to achieve and what it currently does, and these shifts in our external environment, require changes to our systems of curriculum, assessment, accountability, and teacher training. Substantial change will require considered strategic planning and gradual implementation and should be part of a 10-year vision rather than implemented reactively and piecemeal.

There are some elements we believe this plan must include. For example, we know that certain skills are helpful for adapting to new contexts and remaining resilient in the face of unexpected change,[60] and that these will be increasingly important in the future. 'Essential skills' such as communication, problem solving, creativity and teamwork enable adaptability and can be built through a combination of explicit teaching and experiences.[61] Of course, ensuring young people leave school numerate and literate is paramount, and essential skills also improve uptake of foundational and academic skills – they reinforce each other. We must support students to build a range of skills throughout their education, including those that will give them the flexibility to thrive in tomorrow's world, through a combination of explicit teaching, enriching experiences, and the building of skills through delivery of core subjects.

We must not attempt to do this by simply adding more subjects to the National Curriculum or EBacc, worsening the workloads of teachers and students. Instead, we must have a thoughtful and phased approach that includes teacher development and a holistic curriculum and assessment review. The output of this should be a broad and balanced curriculum that supports academic attainment, essential skills, and physical and emotional health, as we know these elements to be mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive[62, 63]. We should adopt a universal framework such as that used by organisations within the Skills Builder Partnership,[64] so we can assess progress and help young people articulate the skills they're gaining from experiences inside and outside the classroom.

It's also crucial that changes to our system meaningfully engage the young people our education system is meant to serve. Young people have valuable first-hand experience to share about how well they are being supported to develop their passions, achieve their goals, and access enriching experiences. Meaningful participation by young people in education reforms will bring their valuable perspectives to bear, and make any changes feel more relevant to them.

We support **Rethinking Assessment's** work to reform our assessment system into one that showcases a range of pupil strengths rather than relying exclusively on high-stakes exams. However, we must ensure that poorer pupils, those speaking English as an additional language, and those without good access to cultural experiences are given a fair chance at success. Any move to a more qualitative or holistic system of assessment must be accompanied by changes to the curriculum to avoid exacerbating existing social inequalities.

We also must start measuring what we value by collecting comprehensive data about the wellbeing of young people, using the work of **#BeeWell** as a model. This should be designed with young people and experts, survey a range of aspects that may contribute to wellbeing, and be nationally consistent so that interventions can be compared. School leaders could use this data to better understand the needs of their pupils and what interventions might be required. In addition to the wellbeing of young people being an important goal in its own right, we know there are links between wellbeing and attainment, attendance and exclusions,[65] and understanding a fuller picture can help those working in schools better serve their communities.

To drive, wellbeing, skills and inclusion up the priority list so all young people are engaged and equipped, **we're calling for:**

- A review of the curriculum, teaching, and experiences students access to ensure essential skills and physical and emotional health are developed alongside academic and foundational skills.

- Modernisation of our assessment system – our means of assessment must be more relevant to the world we live in and allow a broad range of young people to showcase their strengths. However, we must be vigilant that these changes don't give wealthier young people an even bigger advantage: exams should still have a place, and from an early stage, our curriculum must explicitly teach the breadth of any skills that would be assessed.

- Work across agencies to collect comprehensive data on the wellbeing of young people, as **#BeeWell** have done in Greater Manchester, so local governments, schools, the third sector, and funding bodies can better understand where investment is needed and what's working for improving wellbeing.

- Opportunity for a diversity of young people to meaningfully participate in decisions impacting their education.

Ensuring access to high-quality early years education for every child

The problem

In the past year, we've seen childcare rise to the top of the priority list for both Labour and Conservatives, and it's clear why this issue has salience with voters – childcare in England is less affordable than ever, and among the most expensive in the world.[66] However, childcare, which aims to increase workforce participation, is not synonymous with early childhood education and care ('ECEC'), which aims to give every child the best educational start in life.

When we talk about childcare policy, we must acknowledge that these goals – economic growth and child development – aren't always aligned, and we need to make the case for a comprehensive ECEC strategy to deliver both.

We know that the current situation results in gaping academic inequality: poorer children start reception an average of 4.5 months behind their wealthier peers, accounting for 40% of the attainment gap at 16.[67] Low-income children also often have language skills that are below the age-related expectations at the time they enter reception – putting them at an educational and social disadvantage.[68]

However, we know that quality ECEC can help close gaps in development between disadvantaged children and others.[69]

Affordability:

Currently, there is an entitlement to 15 hours of funded childcare for all 3- to 4-year-olds and for some 2-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs. The Government's recent extension phases in additional funded hours for working parents, such that by September 2025, 30 funded hours will be available for working parents of children aged nine months through reception[70]. While extending funded hours only to those in work may arguably serve the short-term economic purposes of childcare, it does not best serve the educational and developmental interests of all children.

Supply:

However, the solution can't be as simple as bestowing funded hours to all children, even if a government was willing to make such an investment -- there isn't currently the supply of early years providers or staff.[71] 300 providers closed their doors last year -- at a higher rate in disadvantaged neighbourhoods[72] -- primarily due to insufficient income or staffing[73]. While the Government's uplift to the early years funding rates is very welcome, it is still predicted that many more providers will close when the extension of funded hours to younger children is rolled out due to rising costs[74, 75].

Already, there is worse provision of ECEC in poorer neighbourhoods and a staggering lack of provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities ('SEND'). Over 80% of local authorities don't have enough childcare for children with disabilities[76]. The financial realities of nurseries underpin this: current funding for children not paying fees, and for those with SEND, is insufficient to cover the costs of ECEC settings.[77] If the Government were to extend funded hours to all children, it would not solve the problem of access – those providers that did survive would still be incentivised to prioritise fee-paying children and those without SEND. There must be properly funded places, as well as the funding, training, and incentives for providers to accept and support children with SEND.

Quality and workforce:

And still, even if there were fully-funded places for all children regardless of need, an additional piece of the puzzle would remain: ensuring that provision is high-quality. Without quality provision for all, the gap that exists at the start of reception is unlikely to close. A huge part of ensuring quality is having enough well-equipped staff. When the Government announced its extension of free nursery hours in the last budget, it acknowledged the staffing challenge in this by increasing the ratio of children to staff. However, this raises concerns about quality, and will put more pressure on an already beleaguered workforce.

Further, a growing proportion of poorer children access childcare from private, voluntary, and independent ('PVI') settings rather than maintained ones, and PVI settings located in deprived areas and serving disadvantaged children have been found likely to be of lower quality than those operating in more affluent areas.[78] There is a substantial gap in qualification between staff in PVI and maintained settings, with the former also making greater use of temporary staff.[79]

The early years workforce, like the school workforce, is experiencing a recruitment and retention crisis, with difficulties recruiting qualified staff, a high proportion of EU nationals, and concerns that older, more experienced and qualified staff who retire will not be replaced with similarly qualified staff.[80] Contributing factors to this include low pay, which providers cannot afford to increase, the low status of the profession, and a lack of opportunity for progression. The results -- turnover in staff, and under-qualified or less experienced staff -- are especially likely to impact disadvantaged children.[81]

Additionally, when we discuss quality care to support early childhood development, we must recognise the importance of the home learning environment ('HLE'), which is one of the strongest predictors of a child's development in the early years.[82] A greater proportion of disadvantaged children spend their early years in a home setting, but wealthier children are more likely to access enriching experiences at home that support their language and social development. For example, middle and upper-income children are more likely to be read to, to go on educational outings, and to experience 'language rich' HLEs in comparison with their low-income peers.[83]

Complexity:

Finally, the complexity of the current system can also act as a barrier for low-income families. Uptake of the childcare support available through Universal Credit is low,[84] and the multiple schemes that interact to support families can be confusing and create a barrier to understanding and claiming the full entitlement.[85] Further, applying for a place at a provider, together with providing evidence that they are in receipt of certain benefits and eligible for a place, can be daunting, especially for those who speak English as an additional language or lack access to technology.[86]

The solution

To enable every child to access high-quality early childhood education and care, we're calling for a strategic review of the system, **including:**

- Introduction of universally funded hours for all children, regardless of whether their parents are in work, from the end of parental leave to the start of primary school with the financial barriers to serving lower-income communities addressed. If needed, lower-income parents should be prioritised for funded hours.

- Bringing the Early Years Pupil Premium in line with that for primary pupils and increasing the Disability Access Fund to remove barriers to nurseries providing places to low-income and disabled children.

- Raising the quality of the ECEC provision that all disadvantaged children receive, including through an expansion of maintained settings, support for weaker PVI settings to improve, and support for building great home learning environments.

- A strategy to broaden and strengthen the ECEC workforce, including creative solutions for entry points into the profession, support for young people who have not achieved the relevant academic benchmarks, provision of continuing professional development and progression, and building respect and professionalism for the profession, across all settings.

- A reduction in the complexity of provision and funding, particularly to remove barriers to understanding and using available provision for poorer parents and those who speak English as an additional language.

Solving these entrenched problems will take a combination of long-term strategic thinking, funding, and creativity. First, we need a system wherein high-quality ECEC is accessible and affordable for every family. This means extending the government-funded hours to families with parents not in formal employment, and ensuring funding is sufficient to meet the true cost of quality provision. In recognition that full, universal provision may not be feasible from the end of parental leave, poorer families should be prioritised for funding.

We must simultaneously remove barriers to quality provision in poorer neighbourhoods. This means the Government funding hours at the true cost, so providers aren't reliant on cross-subsidy through paid hours. Further, the Pupil Premium should be extended to ECEC at the same rate as primary so providers have the resources they need to support children facing the greatest challenges. Staff also need more funding and training to support children with SEND, especially in the low-income communities, where mainstream provision is already lacking.

As we respond to the economic need to make childcare more affordable, quality should remain a focus. As it is in schools, a strong workforce is fundamental to quality ECEC. We need a long-term strategy to build this workforce through better pay and increased respect for the profession, including through opportunities for career progression. We must also consider how we can maintain a variety of routes into the profession and create new ones. For example, how can we creatively leverage untapped labour like parents currently not in the workforce, who might become qualified providers whilst caring for their own children? How can we help young people overcome the current barriers to entry into the early years workforce, such as the high proportion of students without the required GCSEs to gain entry onto new T-levels?[87] We must address this or face a potential further drop-off in the supply of early years practitioners. All of this should form a holistic strategy for recruiting, training, progressing and rewarding the early years workforce.

We must also plan for raising the quality of those PVI providers, including nurseries and childminders, who serve an increasing number of poorer children due to decreasing maintained provision, including considering additional government funding for training. We must also consider a targeted expansion of maintained provision, which has high levels of expertise in meeting the needs of children with SEND.[88]

Parental choice to support their children at home must also be supported, especially as disadvantaged children are less likely to access ECEC in settings outside the home than their peers.[89] All families should understand the dramatic impact the home learning environment (HLE) can have,[90] and receive the recognition and support needed to enable them to support their children's learning at home. A good quality HLE can mitigate the effects of disadvantage, even into the teenage years, and can moderate the impact of socioeconomic background on cognitive skills and socioemotional difficulties.[91]

Family Hubs and the Start for Life Programme could provide a conduit for this information, guidance and training, and support for home learning should form part of what Family Hubs deliver as the model is rolled out (We discuss the need to scale up the Family Hubs model **here**.)

Finally, we need a system that is less complex for poorer families to navigate. There is currently a mixed market of provision and piecemeal system of funding entitlements. There may be advantages to this plurality of settings,[92] but there is no advantage to the complexity of funding. Options for simplifying the system and funding streams should form part of the holistic review of early years described herein and could range from a co-payment model[93] to centralised support for families to streamline their entitlements and applications.

Join-up and funding of the local support around families

The problem

It has often been said that schools are the fourth emergency service. As the only institution that has a consistent touchpoint with every child in the country, it is unavoidable that schools will play a crucial role in the support system around families. However, more and more, school capacity and budgets are filling holes in underfunded locally delivered services, without the long-term community investment needed to help localities meet their particular needs.

Child poverty is rising: nationally, 350,000 children fell into poverty last year, and that number is expected to rise this year[94]. An increasing number of families are also falling into deep poverty, unable to afford essentials like food or heating[95]. These families rely on charities and local services to get by and keep themselves safe, but those support systems are often disjointed and underfunded. Over the last decade, funding for early-intervention children's services such as children's services and family support has declined, whilst crisis intervention costs, such as youth justice and child protection, have skyrocketed,[96] and many areas are seeing a growing lack of affordable housing that has deepened the impact of the cost-of-living crisis[97]. The impacts of the divestment of these various agencies and locally delivered services around a family have been compounded by each other and the pandemic.

Further, the mental health of children and young people is worsening. Happiness levels amongst 10–15-year-olds have declined, and the rate of 6–16-year-olds with probable mental disorders has increased[98]. Sometimes, emotional stress is related to the rising poverty described above[99]. Referrals to Children and Adult Mental Health Services ('CAMHS') have increased drastically since the pandemic[100], and schools are left to support the huge proportion of pupils who are unable to access this service.

Schools often step in where they can: from social care to mental health, housing, and community policing, school staff have reported that they are doing jobs outside of their remits. 72% of all teachers, and 82% of those in Educational Improvement Areas, said that they are helping pupils more with non-academic matters than they did five years ago, including supporting them with their mental health, buying key supplies, or signposting their families to support. An estimated one in five schools have set up food banks[101]. Filling these gaps has an impact on staff workload and stress.

Providing this wider support also comes at a cost to school budgets without any additional funding. Schools often need more staff, such as family support workers to help families meet their basic needs, to provide facilities such as washing machines and dryers, and to offer food to ensure every child can be clothed and fed. Further, schools report that more children are coming to school hungry, cold, and tired, leaving them less able to concentrate[102]. Teachers are not therapists, social workers, or relief workers, and it does a disservice to both schools and the communities they serve to expect them to continue being all things to all children[103,104, 105].

In addition to needing funding, these agencies and the organisations that work alongside them often operate in silos, without seeing the full picture, communicating easily, or having clarity about roles and responsibilities. This has led to inefficient delivery of services and interventions to the families most in need, without agency by the communities being served, tailoring to local needs, or a long-term strategy for working collectively to improve outcomes[106].

The siloed working happening in many localities is mirrored nationally. For example, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has youth opportunities within its remit, and the Department for Health and Social Care oversee children and young people's health and children's social care. There are many other departments that may make policies relevant to education – the Department for Justice and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to name just two. We welcome the new Shared Outcomes Fund, which supports "novel, cross-departmental pilot projects in complex policy areas to test innovative ways of working across the public sector", but we need closer collaboration in the business-as-usual strategic planning of departments. Too often, different services are pitted against each other for funding when each is an important part of the puzzle. Instead, more planning should be done with holistic outcomes in mind.

Further, the funding streams meant to mitigate some of the impacts of poverty on education have flatlined over the past decade while need and costs have risen. More teachers report children arriving at school hungry[107], which we know to be linked to poorer attendance, attainment and behaviour[108]. The very low ceiling for free school meal ('FSM') eligibility means that about one third of children living in poverty do not qualify. Further, the funding for FSM has not kept pace with inflation, meaning schools must top up the amount they receive to fulfil their statutory duties[109].

The Pupil Premium, another source of funding for the neediest pupils, needs review. This was originally calculated to give disadvantaged pupils an equal level of funding as pupils in the private sector, but the amount of funding has barely risen since it was introduced in 2008[110], despite deepening poverty[111], sharp inflation[112], and rising fees in the independent sector[113]. Due to wider real-terms loss of school funding, a third of school leaders report using their Pupil Premium funding to plug gaps in their budgets[114], diverting it from its original function: a targeted way to lessen the effect of poverty on educational outcomes.

The solution

To ensure schools can focus on education, we need long-term strategies for adequately funding and delivering the services supporting families at an earlier stage, including social care, implementing the recommendations of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care,[115] and mental health, implementing the recommendations of the Commission for Young Lives.[116] Further, we need a national plan to deliver more affordable housing.
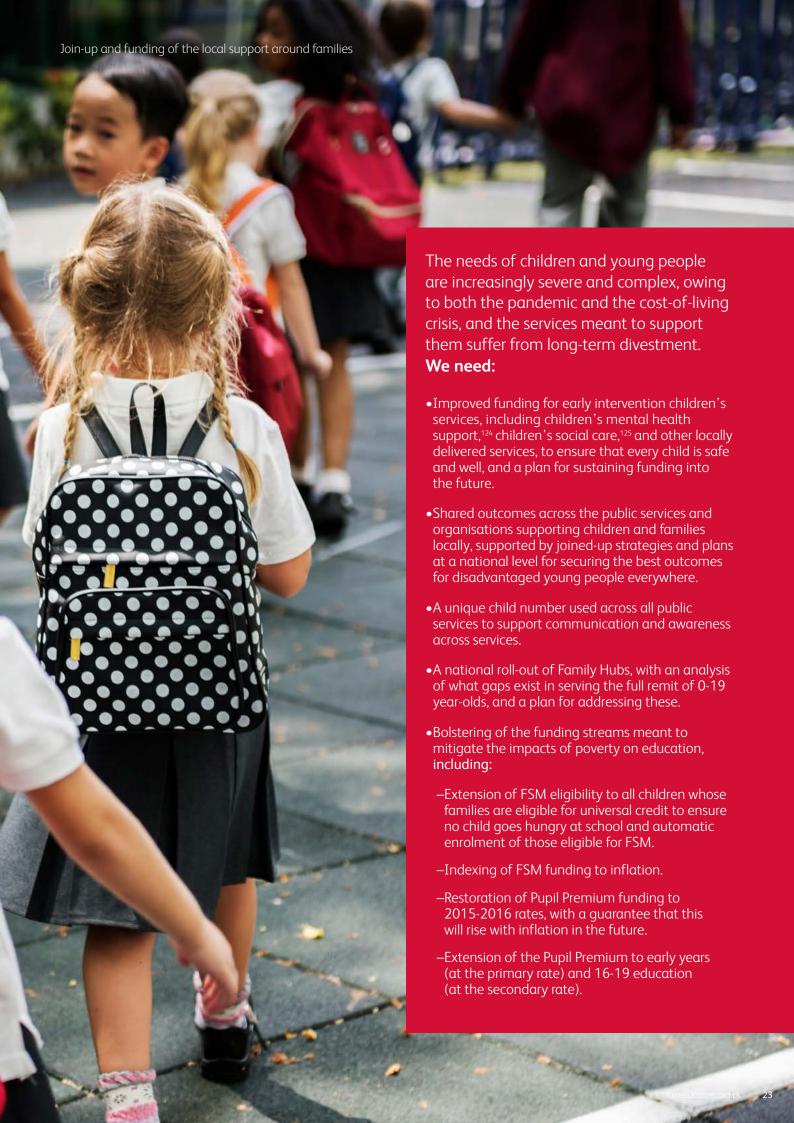
Aside from funding, we also know that clearer roles and responsibilities and better channels for communication between locally delivered services can have a huge impact on children's outcomes. For example, strengthening relationships and ways of working between multi-agency partners has been shown to prevent school exclusions.[117] Also, we know that holistic planning amongst cross-sector organisations can improve outcomes for communities[118]. Principles of successful place-based change, including shared outcomes, a long-term commitment, community leadership, and creating the infrastructure for partnership working, should be applied across the public services and organisations serving families locally. However, this too has a link to funding, as schools and other partners need the capacity to link up their work and keep the child at the centre through regular joint meetings and shared plans.

We also need better join-up at a national level. The Family Hubs and Start for Life programmes,[119] bringing together the Departments of Education and Health and Social Care, present an opportunity to do this. They aim to integrate services by providing a central access point for services around a family and should be rolled out nationally. However, their remit of 0-19-year-olds presents a spectrum of needs, and we must consider whether they are the right structures to fill the gap left by closed youth centres,[120] and if not, how this gap might be filled. In this roll-out, there must be sufficient scope for tailoring to local needs.

Developing shared outcomes for children and families across all public services would also support the development of joined-up strategies and plans. The Children's Commissioner has presented an Outcomes Framework that could be used to develop a common language and shared goals.[121] A reduction in poverty is key to achieving such shared outcomes and must be a goal of such a joined-up strategy. A Unique Child Number used across public services would further support collaboration, allowing records across health, education, and locally provided services to be linked and practitioners to understand what other support a child is accessing. It could also enable automatic enrolment in benefits such as FSM.

Finally, whilst we better support families in poverty outside the school gates, we must also ensure that school funding is targeted to lessen the impacts of poverty on educational outcomes. Fundamental to this is that no child goes hungry at school. Extending FSM to all children receiving Universal Credit would present a significant return on investment,[122] and has been found to improve attendance, attainment and behaviour.[122] The Pupil Premium also needs review; if the methods used to calculate the rate in 2008 were used today, the funding amount would nearly triple.[123] We need an uplift to Pupil Premium to keep it in line with inflation, and an extension of the same rate to the full spectrum of education: from early years through to post-16.

The needs of children and young people are increasingly severe and complex, owing to both the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, and the services meant to support them suffer from long-term divestment. **We need:**

• Improved funding for early intervention children's services, including children's mental health support,[124] children's social care,[125] and other locally delivered services, to ensure that every child is safe and well, and a plan for sustaining funding into the future.

• Shared outcomes across the public services and organisations supporting children and families locally, supported by joined-up strategies and plans at a national level for securing the best outcomes for disadvantaged young people everywhere.

• A unique child number used across all public services to support communication and awareness across services.

• A national roll-out of Family Hubs, with an analysis of what gaps exist in serving the full remit of 0-19 year-olds, and a plan for addressing these.

• Bolstering of the funding streams meant to mitigate the impacts of poverty on education, **including:**

  – Extension of FSM eligibility to all children whose families are eligible for universal credit to ensure no child goes hungry at school and automatic enrolment of those eligible for FSM.

  – Indexing of FSM funding to inflation.

  – Restoration of Pupil Premium funding to 2015-2016 rates, with a guarantee that this will rise with inflation in the future.

  – Extension of the Pupil Premium to early years (at the primary rate) and 16-19 education (at the secondary rate).

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