

COVID-19 series: briefing on schools, October 2020

Evidence from pilot visits to schools between 29 September and 23 October 2020

During the autumn term, Ofsted is carrying out a series of 'interim visits' to schools. This briefing note reports on 380 visits carried out between 29 September and 23 October. This is our second briefing note,¹ and we intend to publish the next one in December this year.

Data summary

Table: The number of interim visits in this analysis

School phase	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate	No previous grade*	Total**
Primary	38 (14%)	152 (57%)	37 (14%)	38 (14%)	1 (<1%)	266 (70%)
Secondary	17 (20%)	29 (33%)	17 (20%)	24 (27%)	N/A	87 (23%)
Other (incl. pupil referral units and special)	8 (30%)	13 (48%)	1 (4%)	5 (18%)	N/A	27 (7%)
Total in sample	63 (17%)	194 (51%)	55 (14%)	67 (18%)	1 (<1%)	380 (100%)

*A school with no previous grade is usually a new school.

** % in this column are calculated out of 'total in sample' and total 'national picture', respectively.

Main findings

There is wide variability in the extent to which pupils have returned to school this term: not all pupils have come back following the first national lockdown. And while, in many schools, attendance rates for those who have come back are comparable to normal for this time of year, in others it is now being affected by groups of pupils having to self-isolate.

Leaders said that they were making some adaptations to their curriculum, based on practical considerations, or as a result of pupils having lost learning while not at school, or often both. Leaders were ambitious to return their schools to their usual,

¹ Our first briefing note: www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-series-briefing-on-schools-september-2020.

full curriculum as soon as possible. They also talked about the many challenges they were facing in keeping their schools safe and open. Leaders said that their pupils were generally happy to be back, and had settled in well. But they were also clear about the changes they had seen in some pupils, including poorer physical and mental health.

Methodological note

This is the second in our series of briefing notes about COVID-19 (coronavirus). The evidence in it is based on one-day interim visits with no graded judgement. We analysed the evidence from 380 visits. The schools were selected by us for the visits. The sample is comparable to the national picture in terms of the spread of schools across education phases (for example, primary schools constitute 70% of our sample and 77% of all the schools nationally). It is also broadly comparable in terms of the spread of schools across the four inspection judgements (outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate), but there is a higher percentage of inadequate schools in our sample and a smaller percentage of good schools.

Overarching questions

This briefing answers **four** broad questions based on evidence from the visits:

1. What is the current state of children's school education?
2. How have children been affected by schools' closures to most children?
3. How are schools planning to maintain standards in education through the pandemic?
4. What are schools doing with their COVID-19 catch-up funding?

The current state of children's school education

Returning to school

There is wide variability from one school to the next in terms of whether all pupils have returned to school, and the extent to which attendance is being affected by COVID-19.

Around three quarters of the schools visited reported having attendance that was similar to, or higher than, this time last year. As we reported in our first briefing, where attendance had improved, leaders often attributed this to the work that they had done to build families' trust during the first national lockdown, and their continued efforts to inform and reassure parents about the arrangements they had made to keep pupils safe in school. However, in some schools, attendance had dropped since the start of the term.

Many leaders said that a few pupils had not returned to school in September. In some schools, these were families who had gone to stay in another country, sometimes their home country (often in Eastern Europe) at some point in the last few months, and had not returned. Some families had recently returned to England but were in quarantine. Several schools reported that their pupils from Gypsy, Roma

and Traveller communities had not returned to school, sometimes noting that parents had said the children would not return until COVID-19 'is over'. In schools with significant proportions of minority ethnic pupils, some leaders said that the local community's experiences of COVID-19 had made families particularly anxious about allowing their children to return to school. Leaders described how they were working closely with parents and offering flexible arrangements if these were needed to help pupils to return as soon as possible.

Leaders in special schools reported a mixed picture in terms of attendance. Not all schools were fully open to all pupils. A few schools had chosen to have a 'staggered start', bringing pupils back to school gradually. Other leaders said that conflicting or changing advice about how to cater for pupils who needed certain types of care were causing delays to some pupils being able to return. Some leaders spoke of their distress in having to tell some families that their children could not return because they did not have the medical support to cater for them in school. In schools with pupils with complex needs, including medical needs, attendance at the time of the visits tended to be lower than usual, even when all pupils had been welcomed back. Leaders thought that this was mainly because of parents' anxiety about their children's vulnerabilities to infection. Leaders also spoke about pupils' own anxieties preventing them from coming back to school.

Leaders of alternative provision (AP) settings said that the work they had done during the first national lockdown to support families had had a positive impact on their relationships with families, and now on pupils' attendance. Nevertheless, some were having to work hard to get pupils into school, including visiting them at home when pupils did not turn up.

A few leaders, both of special schools and AP settings, said that some pupils had been unable to return to school because their transport – taxis or minibuses – was not in place or there were other transport-related issues. For example, occasionally, a local authority was not providing the transport escorts to travel with the pupils, which meant that families were not prepared to let their children travel to school as they felt it was not safe.

At the time of the visits, many schools of all types had pupils absent because they were self-isolating, or had to send individual pupils home because they were showing COVID-19 symptoms. In addition, over a quarter of all schools had sent 'bubbles' of pupils home to self-isolate. This had happened more frequently in secondary schools than in primary schools. Most commonly, this involved between 15 and 80 pupils. However, in a few cases, large numbers of pupils were involved – over 100 in primary, and occasionally over 400 in secondaries when pupils in more than one year group had been tested positive for COVID-19.

In a few cases, leaders said that they were now being advised by Public Health England (PHE) to send fewer pupils home than they had done previously. It appears that some schools are becoming more able to provide detailed information to PHE about who their pupils have been in close contact with. In one primary school, for example, leaders explained that they had used their electronic recording system to

log when a pupil or staff member had sustained contact with a pupil or staff member from outside a 'bubble', so that they could respond accordingly if any of them then caught COVID-19, rather than needing a whole bubble to self-isolate. In a few secondary schools, leaders were using fixed seating plans to assist 'track and trace'. As a result, these schools had not sent entire bubbles home, but smaller groups of pupils who have been in sustained contact with each other.

Almost half the schools had had pupils whose parents had removed them from the school roll to electively home educate them since the start of the autumn term. Of these, three fifths had had more than one child removed from the school, and sometimes more than one child from the same family. Almost always, schools reported that this was related to families' anxieties about COVID-19, rather than because educating at home had gone well during the first national lockdown. Most commonly, it appears that parents are concerned about vulnerable family members. Sometimes, they seem to be worried about whether their children will be safe from COVID-19 in school.

Very occasionally, leaders reported that their rate of fixed-term exclusion was rising. In each case, they attributed this to not being able to put in place their usual layers of sanctions before exclusion, such as putting pupils who were disrupting learning into another lesson or into isolation. The leaders said that space restrictions and the need to keep pupils in bubbles meant that these types of measures were not practical.

Returning to the curriculum

Most of the secondary schools were teaching all their usual subjects. Many of the primary schools were teaching all subjects, but some were not. Even when teaching all subjects, most schools were making at least some adaptations to the order and content of the curriculum in response to gaps in pupils' learning and to COVID-19 restrictions.

Nearly all primary school leaders said that they were prioritising reading and mathematics, with very few schools focusing on science. Some also talked about needing to work on pupils' writing, including their 'stamina' when writing at length. They felt that pupils had lost this ability during the first national lockdown, when they had not had the chance to practise their writing style and posture. Almost all the schools were concentrating strongly on phonics. Schools were using different strategies to support this focus. For example, some had allocated additional daily teaching time. Others were using catch-up programmes and interventions such as afternoon repetition of content that had been taught in phonics sessions in the morning for pupils who needed this. A few schools were teaching phonics to all pupils twice a day. Some leaders said that they had extended their phonics teaching into Year 3 – some for all pupils, some for those they felt needed it most. Some leaders were also working on rekindling pupils' love for reading and on improving fluency, comprehension and reading accuracy.

Primary school leaders said that they were making some adaptations to the curriculum within foundation subjects. Some were reducing the amount of depth covered in each subject, often to make time to cover learning in core subjects. Although many primary schools were teaching a full range of foundation subjects, some had chosen to postpone some subjects until later in the year. Generally, in those schools that were not yet offering the full breadth of subjects, leaders had planned a gradual reintroduction of subjects over the autumn and spring. A few primary school leaders reported that they had suspended the teaching of the modern foreign languages (MFL) curriculum because they used a specialist teacher, who they felt should not 'cross bubbles'.

Most secondary school leaders said that pupils in all year groups had returned to all subjects. Pupils in key stages 4 and 5 were generally continuing with their planned courses of study towards national examinations. A few leaders mentioned that they may need to consider whether some pupils should drop a subject at some point in the future, in exceptional circumstances. Many of the leaders reported having restrictions on their full provision of practical activity for pupils in key stage 3 in subjects such as science, design technology, music and computing. This was often because specialist teaching areas in schools were not accessible to all bubbles and leaders had prioritised pupils in key stages 4 and 5 for these spaces. Many secondary schools were reordering their curriculum content to take account of safety guidance. For example, within physical education (PE), many schools had swapped a team sport unit with athletics, dance or fitness activity. In music, many leaders had made the decision to suspend singing and instrumental work for the time being. Other schools had introduced singing outside or were able to find alternative resources and large spaces inside to safely deliver their usual music curriculum.

Some primary and secondary school leaders said that they were still working on how best to modify their curriculum, and that this would be informed by assessment as the term progressed. For example, some schools had not yet identified all 'missed' content in all subjects and so had not yet built a comprehensive picture of the key components that needed to be adapted or reintegrated into the curriculum.

All the special schools and AP settings had made some adaptations to their curriculum in response to COVID-19 considerations. In common with the mainstream schools, several were not taking pupils swimming, and others talked about adapting the way they taught music, design and technology, and PE. Leaders of schools with pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties spoke about being unable to use hydrotherapy pools because of the physical support pupils need in order to do so. For some pupils, this is the only time they can move freely, so leaders felt that this was affecting some quite badly, both mentally and physically. However, very occasionally, leaders had made the opposite choice – they had prioritised swimming and hydrotherapy as they felt strongly that these were essential to some pupils to help them to regain their mobility. Others had prioritised other aspects of the curriculum that they saw as essential for their pupils, such as language and communication, developing independence and preparation for adult life. Local restrictions were sometimes making it difficult for schools to use community resources to extend the curriculum as they normally would. Vocational courses such

as hairdressing and motor mechanics were being adapted. Leaders of special schools and AP settings also spoke about how they were currently not using outside speakers, theatre or dance groups, or residential trips to enrich the curriculum.

Many schools of all types reported a greater focus than usual on their personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum to develop aspects such as resilience and independence and to reinforce or improve learning behaviours, but also to address pupils' anxieties. Some schools were also strengthening their PE provision to support pupils' physical and mental well-being. Many of the special schools and AP settings visited were placing a strong emphasis on 'recovery' as part of their autumn-term curriculum. In one school, for example, leaders explained how important they thought it was to help pupils to adapt: 'The world is a different place and we can't move on like nothing has happened. We need to teach them why these things are important: the rules, what's on in the news.'

Remote learning

At the time of our visits, almost all schools were either providing remote learning to pupils who were self-isolating or said that they were ready to do so if needed. Most schools were continuing to develop the work that they had started on remote education during the first national lockdown.

Most of the mainstream schools that were delivering remote education were using a mixture of paper-based work, textbooks, live or recorded lessons and other digital platforms and resources. Many schools are now teaching, or intend to teach, some 'live video lessons' remotely. However, as at the time of the first briefing, some schools reported that they were not using live lessons because of their concerns about safeguarding, and do not intend to do so. In contrast, a few schools considered live video lessons important for children's emotional and social health, and said these allowed teachers to spot potential safeguarding issues at home.

There appears to be some variation in how schools approach the way in which they deliver remote education, depending on whether a whole bubble is self-isolating or an individual pupil. When bubbles – which, in a secondary school, may be whole year groups – are sent home, many schools were either using or planned to use live or recorded video lessons. One secondary school subject leader, for example, commented that when their Year 10 bubble was self-isolating, 'the whole corridor was doing live lessons'. Some leaders noted that during the first national lockdown, pupils reacted very positively when there was live contact from teachers, so want to build on that when needed.

In contrast, when individual children are sent home, many schools either send out a pack of work that can last two weeks or set remote learning that is a mixture of work on digital platforms and work in exercise books. Often, there was no live or recorded video teaching for individuals. A few leaders thought that it was more challenging for staff to offer remote education for small numbers of pupils, given that teachers still have their class to teach in school. One, for example, said that if they had to teach

live or recorded lessons for a few then 'teachers would be trying to deliver two systems at the same time... this is an unrealistic expectation for staff'.

Leaders in a few schools explained how they were trying to mitigate the additional demands on staff of providing remote learning, for example through the help of teaching assistants, or having staff who took a particular role in leading or modelling remote education. Some leaders talked about learning platforms that 'assessed pupils' work automatically', which they felt was helpful in reducing workload.

Schools are in the process of working out what works best in terms of aligning their remote education with their curriculum. The curriculum content for remote education appears to be selected differently by different schools, and to some extent be related to method of delivery. Some leaders explained how they had decided to focus more on particular subjects and on certain topics within subjects to deliver remotely, rather than trying to ensure that all subjects and content within them are covered. Some leaders noted that, if being delivered remotely, the more practical subjects such as PE, art, design and technology, and science had to be significantly adapted, and they were working on this. A few schools, though, were not covering practical elements within subjects through remote education at all. The extent of alignment also appears to be different depending on whether individuals or bubbles are self-isolating, as explained above.

Leaders in most schools said that they were monitoring pupils' access to the work provided or attendance at the remote lesson. Digital platforms themselves often allowed the school to monitor whether pupils had attended the lesson or completed the task. Fewer leaders were able to explain how they were assessing what pupils had learned through the remote education they were receiving. Some leaders said that they used online programmes that had built-in formative assessments or allowed pupils to upload work or photos of work for the teacher to see. A few schools were allowing pupils to submit written online questions and answers while live video teaching was taking place, to allow the teacher to see what had and had not been understood.

Many schools acknowledged the importance of the role of parents in the delivery of remote learning. Some primary schools expected parents to work with their children on the tasks set. One leader, for example, said that a great deal of parental engagement was needed to teach mathematics and that a teaching assistant was 'teaching parents the maths in the street'. Another noted that their expectations are lower when remote learning is happening because 'parents cannot achieve the same as the teachers'. Some leaders recognised that expectations on parents had been too high and had sought to address this through a variety of means – for example, through increasing live video lessons and thinking more carefully about the structure of a day.

Leaders of the special schools visited had decided on their approach to remote learning depending on the needs of their pupils. While some were approaching this in a similar way to the mainstream schools, combining online delivery with textbooks and worksheets, others were having to take a different approach for their pupils with

the most complex needs. Leaders described how their teachers had made mathematics, story and phonics videos for parents to use with their children, had planned work that incorporated speech and language therapy programmes, and had regular phone calls with parents to discuss pupils' individual curriculum needs. Some said that online activities were available through their websites, including those that pupils could access on a tablet. These leaders emphasised, though, the demands that remote learning of any kind places on families when pupils need continual adult support. As one leader commented: 'We have to take into account what is realistic and what is useful.'

AP settings also described challenges in making the approaches to remote learning suit their pupils' needs. Some older pupils who were shielding or self-isolating had been given workbooks in English, mathematics and science to match the work being completed in school. Leaders described how taking workbooks to homes and collecting them again allowed them to 'keep an eye' on pupils as part of their safeguarding approach.

Occasionally, leaders, both in mainstream and special schools, said that remote learning had worked better for some pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) than they had originally thought it would. One leader, for example, explained how pupils with autistic spectrum disorder have 'taken control' over their work and are asking for feedback more regularly from teachers. The leader said that they are in the process of working out 'what are the keepers' with regard to remote learning. Another leader talked about the benefits of pupils with SEND having time to stop and start recorded video lessons when they needed to.

Staff training and recruitment

Staff in many schools seized the opportunity for training and development during the months when most pupils were not physically in school. Since then, training has been mostly online and sometimes face-to-face with social distancing. Leaders note that online training cuts costs and travel time, which also results in more staff being able to attend. As we reported in our first briefing, leaders consistently said that staff have had safeguarding training, supplemented by training on adverse childhood experiences, government guidance, COVID-19 safety practices and their implementation in their own school. The focus of some of this training is also on identifying and addressing safeguarding concerns while pupils are being remotely educated. In some cases, staff received training on domestic violence or 'county lines'² because these are issues in their local area or because leaders are anticipating what pupils may be at risk of as COVID-19 continues.

Most staff have had training on remote education, typically on how to use specific online platforms and ensure online safety. However, leaders in some schools noted that training in this area is not just about learning 'how to use certain software'.

² 'County lines' is where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by gangs.

Some have therefore trained staff on how to 'teach online effectively' and refine their lesson delivery, with a focus on how to:

- design learning materials for online use (videos or other)
- align digital content with the school's curriculum
- pre-record lessons or teach live lessons online
- provide voice commentaries on presentation slides
- introduce pause points so pupils can reflect on their learning or catch up if they are behind
- check pupils' understanding
- assess pupils' work and give them feedback.

In parallel with safeguarding and remote education, the focus of training and preparation for the new school year was also on curriculum in many schools: curriculum planning and design, curriculum refinement and coherent sequencing of learning. There is a sense expressed by some leaders that the first national lockdown has provided the necessary time for getting 'the curriculum to where it needs to be'.

Maintaining staff's well-being

Leaders said that their staff have generally adapted well to various changes, and are working hard to make these work. They attributed this to frequent and effective communication with staff as well as to a stronger sense of team spirit that has emerged over the last few months. Virtual communication has played an important role in building relationships among staff, giving them opportunity to improve professionally, for example to share tips and lessons learned on remote learning and to socialise online. Some leaders have also reaped the benefits of local headteachers' networks, which have helped them get to grips with changing regulations on COVID-19, in addition to giving them virtual space to 'laugh and offload together'.

Leaders say that supporting staff's well-being over the last few months has been particularly important. They have been able to identify the sources of additional stress and anxiety of their staff, such as working while also looking after and educating their own children, caring for elderly parents or relatives, or concerns about their own vulnerability in the context of COVID-19. Regular conversations with individual members of staff, or in some cases staff surveys, have helped leaders better appreciate the personal circumstances of their staff, address their concerns, manage their workload and help them return safely to school. Leaders, though, were really feeling the pressures of their own additional responsibilities. We report on this in more detail below.

How children were affected by the first national lockdown

Catching up on lost learning

In the mainstream schools visited, there was no real consensus about the extent of pupils' learning loss as a result of the disruption to their education. Some leaders said they were not fully aware of pupils' learning losses yet. In the most recent visits, more leaders talked about pupils having many gaps in their learning, or having regressed, than in the visits that took place earlier in the term. This is likely to be because they had had more time to assess pupils to find out what they had learned during the first national lockdown, and what learning was not yet secure.

Occasionally, leaders had assessed pupils but felt that more issues would emerge in time – one said, for example, 'We anticipated some issues and initially we didn't see as much as we thought but I don't think we have seen the full impact of COVID'. We talk more about how schools are assessing pupils later in this briefing.

Primary school leaders most commonly identified that pupils had lost some of their knowledge and skills in reading. Some leaders commented that writing was also an issue for some pupils, including writing at length, spelling, grammar, presentation, punctuation and handwriting. Some leaders said that children had fallen behind in language and communication skills and others said pupils' oral fluency had regressed. A few leaders felt that pupils who speak English as an additional language were struggling more than others with some of these aspects. Primary school leaders also said that many pupils had fallen behind in mathematics. Leaders in many schools were particularly concerned about forgotten and lost learning for pupils with SEND, especially in literacy. Some leaders said that pupils with SEND have 'struggled' and have 'fallen further' than those without SEND.

In secondary schools, literacy and mathematics were also a concern. Like the primary leaders, secondary leaders also said that their pupils were finding it difficult to write for long periods of time. Some also said that pupils had gaps in their learning in more practical subjects, such as in PE, design and technology, and music. They also mentioned that pupils had particularly fallen behind in MFL.

As reported in the first briefing, leaders of special schools found that some pupils' communication and physical skills had regressed, particularly those with more complex needs. For example, leaders talked about pupils who had not been able to use their communication systems at home because families were not confident in using them. Others mentioned declines in physical development; for example, pupils not having been able to use standing frames at home because of lack of space now being unable to stand. Not all multi-agency support has restarted. Leaders said that where occupational, speech and language or physiotherapists were not coming into school, this was very concerning because of the impact it has on the pupils. One leader, for example, explained the critical importance of physiotherapy: 'For a lot of our young people, there is nothing more important than therapy; fundamentally, it's about being comfortable and then being able to access learning'.

Leaders of AP settings emphasised that their pupils often arrive already behind in their learning because of a previously disrupted education. Leaders expressed particular concern about how effective remote learning had been during the first national lockdown for younger pupils. Despite the provision of devices and different approaches to learning, they felt that pupils' regression since they were last in school suggested that remote learning had not worked well for them. In particular, they thought that younger pupils' phonics, verbal, reading and mathematical skills had been badly affected. Leaders were concerned that older pupils, many of whom were from areas with high levels of deprivation, had missed out on work experience and life skills courses. They feared that this, plus the lost academic learning, could have a serious impact on pupils who left in the summer, making them more likely to end up without any continuing education, training or employment.

Pupils' behaviour and social, emotional and physical health

Leaders in most schools continued to report that pupils were happy to be back. Pupils were described as confident, resilient, calm and eager to learn. There was a general sense that they appreciate school and each other more. Many leaders noticed that behaviour has generally improved. They frequently attributed this to changes in the structure of the school day. For example, staggered breaks and bubbles have reduced possibility for conflict, according to some leaders. Many emphasised that fewer pupils were needing additional support than had been anticipated.

Despite the broadly positive picture, several concerns have emerged: some pupils' concentration or their mental and physical stamina have reduced. Some leaders said pupils were fatigued, 'disconnected' from learning or struggling to stay awake and alert. Even though good behaviour was not just a 'honeymoon period' according to some leaders, others have perceived deterioration in pupils' behaviour and willingness to follow rules compared with when they first returned to school in September. In some schools, leaders reported an increase in anti-social behaviour and/or aggression. These dips in behaviour were attributed in some cases to having experienced domestic violence, trauma and mental health issues at home while the schools were closed to most children.

Leaders attributed certain issues with behaviour and anxiety to pupils' use of social media. For example, leaders explained how some pupils had fallen out with each other through social media during the first national lockdown, and said that these issues were continuing now pupils were back at school. Other pupils had not had any access to social media at all during this period, which had led to them feeling isolated from their peers and out of step with them now they were back at school. Time spent video gaming was also seen a factor that was influencing some boys' behaviour in particular.

In terms of mental well-being, leaders across several schools reported increased cases of pupils self-harming, mainly over the period when schools were closed to most pupils. Some also noted that more pupils were suffering from eating disorders, many of whom had not previously been identified as vulnerable. In terms of social

well-being, some younger pupils in primary schools were experiencing increased attachment to their parents or home as a result of being at home for so long. Some had also lost elements of independence, for example forgetting how to use a knife and fork. Leaders say that some pupils were struggling to interact with their peers due to prolonged isolation and need to relearn how to maintain friendships. This was further compounded by class or year-group bubble restrictions, which mean that pupils cannot socialise as they typically would.

Leaders continued to mention that some pupils had gained weight or that physical fitness has declined. As a result, many schools are making PE a priority, for example by extending PE lessons or encouraging pupils to jog a 'daily mile'.

Many leaders spoke positively about pupils with SEND returning to school. In a couple of schools, leaders noted that additional time spent at home had been positive for pupils with SEND, who had returned with confidence. However, many were also concerned about their resilience and some noticed a need for more social and emotional support on returning to school. This particularly applied to some pupils with autistic spectrum disorder who had become used to the isolation and self-directed learning during the time spent at home. Some schools had anticipated this and arranged for staggered start times for pupils with SEND to allow them to familiarise themselves with the environment and new routines before the other pupils arrive.

Some leaders of AP settings commented that pupils seemed pleased to be back in school, and that relationships between staff and pupils were better than before. One noted that 'pupils see staff as human beings now'. Another noted that pupils saw the school as their own 'safe space'. They attributed this improvement to pupils being grateful for the support provided by the school to their families during the first national lockdown, whether through food parcels and vouchers or just through continual contact.

Safeguarding

Leaders in some schools had seen an increase in vulnerable pupils. They mainly reported identifying vulnerable pupils through risk assessments, conversations with families and notifications from other services. Once identified, schools offered a variety of support, including tailored one-to-one support for pupils and referral to other services. Several leaders said a minority of pupils had suffered neglect during the first national lockdown. In serious cases, a few pupils had been placed into care as a result.

Some leaders of special schools and AP settings were very concerned about pupils' experiences. They talked about some pupils having become more involved in criminal exploitation, including gang violence, and child sexual exploitation. Leaders talked about seeing rises in anxiety levels and aggression. As a result, leaders felt the need to put in place additional pastoral support. One AP setting described how it had implemented mentoring and additional PSHE sessions specifically to help pupils to understand more about the dangers of becoming involved in criminal activities.

Many leaders were concerned about the impact that the end of the furlough scheme might have on the financial situation of families, and whether this will lead to an increase in vulnerable pupils. The mental health of parents was a cause of concern for quite a few schools, as, if there are issues, this can impact on the well-being of pupils. Increased anxiety of parents has led to schools deeming some pupils as newly vulnerable. Schools are offering these pupils/families additional support.

How schools plan to maintain high standards in education

Working towards full recovery

Leaders told inspectors how they were ambitious to return their schools to their usual full curriculum as soon as possible and nearly all said that they planned for this to be done before next summer. Many mainstream school leaders felt that this could be achieved earlier. Nevertheless, it was clear from the discussions held during our visits that there are currently many factors in play that will influence this timing. A very small number of mainstream school leaders felt that a full return would be later than the summer term. Leaders of special schools for pupils with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties were not expecting to be able to return to their full curriculum until social distancing measures were relaxed, because of the physical support that some pupils needed to take part in some activities. The important part that learning in the community plays in their curriculums was also seen as a limiting factor currently.

Leaders of all schools reported that they were either in the process of carrying out assessments of pupils or had completed them. Through their assessment process, they were aiming to understand any learning losses caused by the closure of schools to most pupils and to find pupils' new starting points. Many leaders said that they were still in the process of building a detailed understanding of learning losses.

Schools were using different approaches to assessment. Some were using approaches that would not provide information about specific gaps in pupils' knowledge or learning losses, for example standardised tests, reading-age tests and cognition tests. Others were using more informal, routine 'assessment for learning' practices across the range of subjects. A few leaders reported that they had not received the assessment information from feeder primaries and that this meant that assessing the starting points for their Year 7 cohort was a priority for them.

Leaders of primary schools were considering what learning had been missed in English and mathematics, and were making curriculum adaptations. But this was often not the case for the foundation subjects, such as history or music. Very few schools reported using any systematic assessments to identify learning losses in foundation subjects. Some schools had no firm plans for modifying or resequencing the content of foundation subjects, no systematic approach to identifying key components required for future learning and no plans to make sure that these were taught. When prioritising the foundation curriculum content to cover, some primary schools had decided to focus on skills, rather than on knowledge. For example, some

schools said that they were teaching historical enquiry skills or mapping skills in place of some new historical or geographical content. Some schools had not fully considered the impact of this method on pupils' knowledge and understanding. Occasionally, the responsibility for adjusting the curriculum was left to the class teacher.

Many secondary school leaders had spent time identifying curriculum content that had been missed while most pupils were learning remotely. For example, one school had taught a poetry unit during the summer because it was more accessible for pupils who were learning at home than the usual Shakespeare unit. This meant that the autumn curriculum had required a shift to reintegrate Shakespeare. Many leaders were considering the sequence of curriculum content that would best support pupils' progression, and prioritising accordingly. Some, for example, were bringing forward particularly challenging units of work, or practical ones such as musical composition, in case of future national lockdowns that would restrict pupils having access to face-to-face teaching or school resources. Other schools reported re-sequencing based on what pupils needed more support with; for example, one school was continuing to focus on grammar in its MFL curriculum rather than pressing on to topic-based work. Some schools referred to 'stripping out' what they saw as non-essential content and only keeping the 'non-negotiables'. Others were teaching their usual curriculum units but 'backfilling' when gaps became apparent. Many were integrating missed content into units of work across the year.

As we reported in our first briefing, some leaders of secondary schools were concerned about whether Year 11 would have enough time to cover the necessary content, learn in depth and prepare for assessed coursework units. A few schools had added extra curriculum time to support pupils to cover the content. Many leaders expressed concern over uncertainties with national examinations and were awaiting notification of curriculum changes to finalise their curriculum modifications. A few were building in more assessment opportunities, including additional mock examinations, in case there were no public examinations again next year and they had to rely on their in-school assessments. The uncertainty was reportedly causing some anxiety for pupils and staff.

Some leaders had decided that, for some pupils, including those with SEND, they needed to go beyond just modifying the curriculum and provide more help to enable them to catch up. Some had already introduced one-to-one or small-group tuition, using their own staff, sometimes before or after school. Others said that they intend to put such programmes in place but are in the process of appointing additional staff to do so. A few leaders said that these intervention sessions were being led by teachers, rather than teaching assistants as they would have been in the past. A small number of schools had extended their school day to give additional teaching time to all pupils.

Like mainstream schools, special schools and AP settings were taking a range of approaches to assessing pupils' starting points this term. Some were using formal tests, saying that they always do this. Others were teaching pupils and assessing them through this. A few leaders talked about how they had worked with parents to

try to find out as much as they could about what pupils had done and learned during the first national lockdown, so they could build on this. For example, one leader said that parents had sent in photographs and videos of their children doing some of the remote learning activities or demonstrating certain skills during time with family.

Challenges for leaders

Some leaders noted that, despite the generally high levels of resilience among staff, their staff are tired or exhausted, and that workload had increased. Leaders said that this was because of the need to:

- teach as normal but also plan teaching and learning in different ways, particularly when remote and face-to-face education happen in parallel
- meticulously apply new safety procedures to prevent COVID-19 from spreading
- support pupils who are not in school
- cover for members of staff who are self-isolating.

The pressures on senior leaders – including headteachers – across many schools have also increased. Leaders described these pressures as unsustainable, overwhelming or unrealistic. According to one of the headteachers, the period between March and now ‘has been the most challenging period of her career’. The extra responsibilities reduce leaders’ time to do their usual work in the school day, which leads to them working more in the evenings and at weekends. Leaders said their workload has increased for the following reasons.

- Some headteachers are taking on more teaching responsibilities, either to alleviate their staff’s workload or when members of staff must self-isolate.
- The messages and guidance in relation to COVID-19 from the Department for Education change frequently. These changes, often described as ‘last minute’, do not give leaders enough time for re-planning and implementation, which results in ‘unrealistic pressure falling on leaders’.
- Leaders also have to physically implement many safety procedures daily: for example, they monitor safe practice around the school and keep children safe as they move around school or during many staggered breaks and lunchtimes. Leaders tend to take on these duties because they do not want to reduce teachers’ teaching time. Some reported that it is taking an average of three hours of senior leaders’ time a day to maintain a safe environment.
- Leaders in some schools that are graded inadequate or requires improvement say that they have an added pressure of working on school improvement while balancing an increased workload.

In addition to the above, leaders have been responsible for maintaining staff morale, for example when staff and pupils alike have lost immediate family members due to

COVID-19. Some leaders were finding it challenging to support the mental health and well-being of the affected staff and pupils.

Leaders were concerned at the prospect of staff's lower attendance over the winter months, and some were already experiencing dips due to staff having to self-isolate. When members of staff are off due to COVID-related reasons, this increases the workload of the staff covering for them or results in high spending on supply staff. For example, one leader commented that 'in four weeks, £5,000 has been spent on additional staffing because of COVID 19'.

In some schools, leaders reported that their budgets were also significantly affected due to the cost of PPE, sanitising materials and actions taken to make the school environment safe and accessible.

Mitigating the effects of the challenges

Many leaders commented that they monitor and review their staff's workload regularly. To compensate for staff's increased responsibilities, some leaders have made several changes to the usual ways of working. These include changes to lesson planning, marking, meetings and after-school clubs.

To reduce pressures that arise from balancing remote and face-to-face education, leaders have taken different approaches. In some schools, leaders have minimised any increase to teachers' workload caused by preparing to deliver, or delivering, both face-to-face and remote education by doing the following.

- In an 'invest-to-save' approach, teachers in several schools were creating (or adjusting their already existing) materials, presentation slides and learning activities, for dual use: in class and remotely.
- Some staff had been trained to use specific online platforms that allowed pupils to join their usual lessons online, from home. In these schools, pupils could also access the same resources remotely that they would normally be using in lessons.
- In some schools, self-isolating staff who were able to work were delivering remote education or improving the chosen online learning platforms.
- In several schools, trusted, off-the-shelf online materials and videos were used to supplement the school's own remote education approach.
- Leaders in a few schools had gradually created a bank of resources to be used should they need to deliver the wider curriculum remotely.

How the COVID-19 catch-up premium is being used

As we reported in the first briefing, many schools have no definite plans yet for the catch-up premium. Where leaders had decided on how to use the funding, they were generally focusing on different ways to help individual pupils to catch-up with missed learning. In primary schools, the intervention work, or planned work, was often

focused on reading, and sometimes also on mathematics and writing. Leaders usually intended to pay for additional staff to enable this work to happen. Some leaders said that these staff would be employed for this purpose, while others planned to use their own staff. One leader said that the latter option was better for them 'because our staff know our kids'.

Leaders also said that they might use the funding to pay for:

- online tutoring
- extending the school day for Year 11
- releasing teachers to plan remote learning
- additional pastoral staff
- education welfare officer (attendance) support
- counselling for pupils.



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