

# COVID-19 series: briefing on schools, November 2020

Evidence from interim visits to 297 schools between 2 and 24 November

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During the autumn term, Ofsted has carried out a series of [interim visits](#) to schools. This briefing note reports on 297 of the visits carried out between 2 November and 24 November. This is our third briefing note in the series.<sup>1</sup>

## Data summary

**Table: The number of interim visits in this analysis (by school phase)**

School phase	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate	No previous grade*	Total**
Primary	28 (17%)	96 (59%)	22 (13%)	17 (10%)	1 (<1%)	164 (55%)
Secondary	11 (11%)	16 (16%)	27 (27%)	44 (44%)	2 (2%)	100 (34%)
Other***	7 (21%)	10 (30%)	1 (3%)	13 (40%)	2 (6%)	33 (11%)
<b>Total in sample</b>	<b>46 (15%)</b>	<b>122 (41%)</b>	<b>50 (17%)</b>	<b>74 (25%)</b>	<b>5 (2%)</b>	<b>297 (100%)</b>

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

\*\* % in this column are calculated out of 'total in sample'.

\*\*\* 'Other' includes pupil referral units and special schools.

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<sup>1</sup> The first briefing note: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-series-briefing-on-schools-september-2020](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-series-briefing-on-schools-september-2020); the second briefing note: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-series-briefing-on-schools-october-2020](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-series-briefing-on-schools-october-2020).

## Main findings

There remains wide variability in the extent to which pupils have returned to school and to which attendance is being affected by COVID-19 (coronavirus). By and large, pupils have returned 'hungry to learn'. Now that leaders have had more time to assess their pupils, though, many believe the learning lost over the first national lockdown was extensive. Some leaders also expressed concern that learning is still being lost when pupils have to self-isolate, particularly when this happens repeatedly. Leaders also talked about seeing increases in undesirable behaviour and a deterioration in physical and mental health for some pupils.

There is now a wide range in schools' experiences of providing remote learning for pupils, depending on how often they have had to do this. Many schools view their approach as a work in progress and are adapting as they go along to improve their offer.

Leaders are determined that they will return to the full curriculum as soon as they can, but they remain under considerable pressure. Many were struggling with the heavy workload, the constant vigilance they need to maintain and the need to respond to COVID-19-related situations on a daily basis.

## Methodological note

This is the third in our series of briefing notes about COVID-19. It is based on analysis of the evidence from 297 one-day interim visits with no graded judgement. The schools were selected by us for the visits. The sample is broadly comparable to the national picture 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.

In these visits, we focused on different foundation subjects each week, to gain further insight into schools' work beyond English and mathematics. We also focused more strongly than in previous visits on the experiences of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools. These foci are reflected in our report.

We have also published a [separate briefing about SEND](#), reporting on our findings in all the settings that we inspect.

## 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

In our previous briefing, we reported a wide variability in terms of whether all pupils had returned to school and the extent to which attendance was being affected by COVID-19. This variability remains.

Previously, some pupils had not returned to school because they had gone to stay in another country. This time, we heard from schools that some of these pupils have now returned. Some pupils who are clinically vulnerable and some Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils have not returned. The extent to which pupils are absent because of having to self-isolate is varied. While some schools have been virtually unaffected, others have had repeated absences related to COVID-19, sometimes for large numbers of pupils and sometimes for the same pupils.

### Elective home education

The numbers of pupils being removed from school to be electively home educated have again risen. Almost three fifths of schools had had at least one pupil whose parents had removed them from school to electively home educate them since the start of the autumn term. A third of these families have taken more than one of their children out of school. Leaders said that some parents have told them that they only want to home educate temporarily and want their children to return once 'the pandemic is over'.

In some schools, a pupil, or sometimes two pupils, had not returned for reasons related to medical needs and COVID-19: for example pupils who were receiving ongoing treatment for cancer or those who had long-term medical conditions. However, these pupils remained on the school's roll and parents intended them to return when they were well enough or when the pandemic was over.

### Pupils with SEND

In most mainstream schools, all pupils with SEND had returned to school full time at the start of the autumn term. Several secondary schools had a few pupils with SEND that had not returned. A few primary schools had a very small number of pupils with SEND who were attending part time, in order to ease anxious pupils' transition back into school or to allay parents' fears. Some leaders said that their pupils with SEND

were attending well this term – in some cases, better than before. In contrast, some leaders commented that attendance for some of their pupils with SEND was ‘a bit up and down’. Some pupils were experiencing difficulties with new routines, being taught in bubbles, settling back into being with other pupils and general anxiety, all of which was affecting their attendance.

### **COVID-19-related absence**

Just over half of the schools visited had had to send some bubbles home to self-isolate at some point during this term. Having to send bubbles home was slightly more prevalent in secondary schools than in primaries. In some cases, schools were affected extensively by COVID-19-related absence. For example, in one, leaders told us that 588 pupils from 620 – almost 95% – had had at least one COVID-19-related absence. These leaders said that, on average, the absence was around nine and a half days per pupil. In another school, every year group had been affected in some way, with either a form bubble isolating or whole year groups sent home at some point. A few leaders said that a significant proportion of their pupils had had to self-isolate on two or three separate occasions.

Some schools were managing to reduce the size of the bubbles they were sending home. Rather than sending home full year groups, they were using seating plans, which helped them to send home only the pupils who were seated close to the infected child. Some schools had found that getting the results from COVID-19 testing had become quicker. This meant that pupils who were self-isolating with symptoms but who had a negative test result could return to school sooner than had previously been the case.

### **Improving attendance for all**

Many leaders told us about the efforts they were putting in to try to maintain or increase attendance more generally, allay any concerns that parents might have and remove barriers to attendance. Some had expanded their pastoral team to provide additional help for families, created new roles or increased the hours of the school counsellors and outreach workers. Many leaders said that they were building on the relationships that they had developed with families during the first national lockdown to help to improve the attendance of pupils whose attendance had always been problematic.

## **Returning to the curriculum**

### **Primary schools**

Almost all the primary schools were teaching their usual range of subjects. Only a few schools were not teaching the full range of subjects, leaving until later in the year subjects such as modern foreign languages (MFL), music, computing or design and technology (DT). Whatever the curriculum offer, schools were making adaptations to the content and sequence of the curriculum. Adaptations were particularly common in English and mathematics, to take into account curriculum content that was not taught or learned well during the first national lockdown.

Leaders were also adapting subjects with practical elements like physical education (PE), DT and music, in response to COVID-19 guidance. Some primary schools were including additional personal, social and health education (PSHE) and PE lessons because they felt it helped to improve pupils' well-being.

Most primary school leaders had restructured their timetables to prioritise English and mathematics, giving more teaching time to these subjects. The extra time was being used to teach components that had not been taught during the first national lockdown and revisiting aspects that had not been well learned. A few schools had designed a 'catch-up' curriculum for mathematics or English, which they were teaching alongside their usual curriculum. Very often, the time that was usually spent on foundation subjects had been reduced to create this extra time for English and mathematics. Other schools had used small amounts of additional time available from 'staggered' starts and finishes to the school day or from not having assemblies.

Many leaders said that in the early years foundation stage (EYFS), they were focusing on communication and language development because they thought that children's speaking and listening skills were weaker than usual. For example, some were spending additional time on reading stories aloud and talking about them, strengthening the way in which adults developed children's language. Others were prioritising physical development. In particular, they were working on improving children's fine motor skills through activities such as modelling work, cutting and threading, and teaching pencil grip and letter formation to develop children's handwriting. A few leaders reported that pupils' gross motor skills were underdeveloped, and were using more outdoor activity to improve them. Social skills, such as taking turns, were a concern for a few schools, so they were spending more curriculum time than usual on children's personal development.

Generally, additional support or different provision that pupils with SEND usually received was still in place. Several schools noted that they had put in place more 'pre-teaching' (introducing vocabulary and concepts that are going to be included in a future lesson) for pupils with SEND. Leaders did, however, mention the barriers they were encountering in arranging some specialist support for these pupils, usually because they did not feel able to move staff around the school's bubbles. A few leaders described how they had created temporary small-group bubbles just for the pupils who needed the most specialised help, where they spent all their time. Conversely, a few others said that all their SEND provision was now in main classrooms.

## **Secondary schools**

In almost all secondary schools, pupils were studying all their usual subjects, as reported in the previous briefing. Almost all pupils taking national examinations were continuing with their courses of study. Most leaders also said that there had been no significant changes to time allocations for subjects. Leaders often expressed determination to offer a rich curriculum experience so that pupils could progress and continue with their future pathways. One leader said, 'We've tried to give our students the best provision we can, the pandemic is no fault of theirs'.

As in the primary schools, secondary school leaders had adapted the content of their curriculum. Many key stage 3 pupils, for example, were doing less practical work, because leaders had prioritised key stage 4 and 5 to use, for example, the science, art and music rooms. Many schools had integrated essential missed components from the summer term into this year's programmes of study. Some secondary schools were placing an additional emphasis on PSHE – for example using tutor time for additional work on mental well-being.

Secondary schools tended to be putting in place the same support that they usually would for pupils with SEND. Leaders encountered the same barriers as primaries with regards to being able to move teaching assistants (TAs) around. A few had created separate small groups for some pupils with SEND, but this was not the norm. Others talked about TAs still being able to work with small groups, with careful assessment of risk. One leader explained how they had created 'support bases' to which TAs were attached for each bubble. Several schools were providing additional tuition to pupils in short after-school sessions.

### **Missing aspects of the curriculum**

Some pupils in both primary and secondary schools were missing more curriculum time than others. Some primary school pupils were missing time in foundation subjects as they were being withdrawn for additional intervention sessions to help them to catch up in English and mathematics. A few secondary school leaders reported that pupils with SEND who attended their specialist unit were not accessing their usual full curriculum because bubble arrangements kept them away from the mainstream classes. Some other secondary pupils were also missing time in some subjects in order to attend intervention sessions in others.

### **Special schools and alternative provision**

Nearly all leaders of special schools and alternative provision (AP) said that pupils were studying their usual subjects, including courses leading to qualifications where relevant. Leaders were determined to provide a rich range of experiences for pupils, including practical and creative activities where possible. However, as with mainstream schools, they were making some adaptations to the curriculum. Many schools were focusing more strongly than usual on core subjects, particularly reading, and on elements of PSHE. Most schools reported that community-based learning (such as shopping and travel training), volunteering, work experience and outdoor activities were not taking place. These practical elements are often core parts of the curriculum that help pupils to prepare for adult life and independent living. The lack of some elements of vocational courses was also having an impact on a few key stage 4 and 5 pupils' curriculum. Some schools were creating on-site experiences such as orienteering in the school grounds, virtual enterprise activities and role play to try to make up for these curriculum gaps. In most schools, some aspects of art, PE, DT, science and music were being taught differently due to social distancing and restrictions to the use of equipment or lack of access to local sport centres and specialist outdoor settings.

## **Extra-curricular provision and enrichment**

Most leaders in schools of all types said that extra-curricular and enrichment activity was reduced or halted due to risk assessments and pupils not being able to cross bubbles. However, more leaders are reporting the use of virtual learning to enhance the curriculum than at the time of our previous briefing. For example, one primary school was given a virtual tour of a local mosque by the imam after they had to cancel their trip. Another school had a virtual tour of the Natural History Museum. Examples from secondary schools included virtual theatre trips and virtual careers guidance. Some schools reported taking pupils on local visits and walks or carrying out 'field trips' in the school grounds. Other schools were having themed experiences within schools to replace planned visits. For example, one school had a 'Saxon day', built around an externally provided virtual workshop. Virtual visits from storytellers and authors were also being used to help pupils rekindle their love for reading. A few schools were beginning to offer some after-school clubs such as sport and gardening.

## **Remote learning**

While some schools have had to send bubbles home frequently this term, and have had many individual pupils who have had to self-isolate, in others this has happened infrequently or not at all. There is, therefore, now a wide range in schools' experiences of providing remote learning. Remote education has been a necessity in the current circumstances. It was clear during our conversations with leaders that many schools view their approach to remote learning as a work in progress. There was evidence that many leaders were reflecting on the approaches that they used during the first national lockdown and the first half of this term, making adaptations according to what they had learned. Leaders often talked about the need to work more on a particular aspect of remote education. Assessment was one of the main areas that schools considered that they needed to think more about.

## **Models of remote learning**

Most primary school leaders said they would be ready to deliver remote learning in some form whenever it was needed. Some of the primary school leaders had, or were planning to have, different approaches for bubbles and self-isolating individuals. The main difference was usually that bubbles would receive some live teaching or pre-recorded online lessons whereas individual pupils would not. In these schools, individuals were likely to receive packs of work to be completed. These were either physical packs containing up to two weeks' worth of work or resources uploaded onto the school website or onto digital platforms that pupils were already familiar with. Some leaders said that this difference in approach was because it was too complicated for teachers to have to teach their own class in school and provide live or recorded teaching for individuals who were at home. Often, the packs for individual self-isolating pupils contained no new curriculum content, but were designed for pupils to consolidate prior knowledge. In contrast, when a bubble was isolating, there would usually be some degree of alignment with the usual curriculum.

Secondary schools had almost all adopted some form of online provision as their model for providing remote learning. Secondary schools usually offered live lessons to self-isolating bubbles. However, the frequency and availability of these varied. Live lessons were only occasionally available for individuals. For sixth formers, set tasks sometimes drove the structure of the day rather than the usual timetabled lessons. Pupils' limited access to technology at home led to some secondary schools deciding to provide recorded lessons or other resources rather than live lessons. If leaders had identified lack of access as an issue, they had attempted to provide appropriate IT equipment to pupils who need it so that those pupils could access the learning materials. Nevertheless, for some pupils, barriers to access still remain. We discuss this later in this the briefing. Some secondary schools provided paper-based materials to pupils who were unable to access online content.

Special school and AP leaders used online learning in a more limited way, often as a way of keeping in touch with pupils rather than as a vehicle for teaching. Leaders usually said that they tailored their approach as needed, using both online and paper-based methods. This depended on pupils' individual needs as well as their access to the internet. These were more important factors in determining their approaches than whether a bubble or an individual was self-isolating.

Half of the special school leaders said that it was unrealistic to expect their pupils to be online for the whole day. Sometimes, the online contact, as much as the online learning, was seen as the key. One leader, for example, talked about the importance of trying to make up for pupils missing the social interactions that they would usually have in school. Another noted that some live interaction was important when individual pupils were self-isolating:

'A big part of this is about connectedness – to peers and staff. Some pupils just can't understand why they're at home; using video links to see the class is reassuring to let them know everything is ok.'

Special school and AP leaders reported that the remote provision worked unexpectedly well for some pupils.

### **Expectations of remote learning in primary schools**

Schools varied in their expectations of remote learning and how these were communicated to pupils and families. Most primary school leaders said that there would be some English (including phonics) and mathematics in the morning with 'topic work' or foundation subjects in the afternoon, mirroring their usual day in school. A small number said that pupils could complete remote learning tasks in any order. Some primary schools focused their remote learning heavily or even solely on mathematics and English. PE and music were two subjects that a number of primary schools reported to be challenging to offer remotely or were not offered, though others said that they ensured that there was an element of PE or a fitness challenge included within the daily programme. A few leaders said that their remote learning work was based entirely on consolidation with no new learning. Generally, the days

appeared to be shorter than the usual school day, although the remote learning day for a few schools lasted up to five and a half hours.

Some primary schools described what a 'typical' remote learning day might look like when a bubble of pupils was self-isolating. Some examples are below.

- Collective worship (recorded); English; mathematics; then in the afternoon 'some form of foundation subject and a breaktime activity'.
- Introduction and overview by class teacher; complete work in any order – three hours for set work but with no particular expectations. For Reception, 'sound challenge, mathematics challenge and an activity'.
- Live check-in to include PSHE; phonics – live session (matched to timetable); follow-up phonics task; break; mathematics; follow-up mathematics task; lunchtime; task in 'any other area of the curriculum'; 2.30pm final check-in.
- For the first two days, staff link Oak National Academy lessons to teaching they would have done in school. From the third day, teachers provide voiced-over lessons that would have been done in school. Approx. 5.5 hours – English, mathematics, two other subjects, a live lesson (maybe reading the class novel – a link to the online learning platform).
- The same lessons that they were due to have in school: live input with teacher then follow-up activity set on the online learning platform.

Some primary schools were delivering live or recorded phonics sessions so that pupils could receive direct teaching of phonics in line with the school's phonics programme. In some cases, schools made use of online phonics teaching videos produced by their phonics programme provider. Some schools that did not deliver live or recorded direct teaching provided phonics practise through games and activities, both paper-based and online.

The approach to remote learning for children in the EYFS was often slightly different to that for Years 1 to 6. Most leaders who talked about remote learning for EYFS children said that there would be daily phonics and mathematics. They also said that stories would be a feature of each day. The afternoon activities tended to be less structured.

The demands on parents when EYFS children are learning remotely are high. Some schools gave parents a broad task to engage pupils in, for example 'what shall we make today?' A few leaders commented that it was hard to introduce new learning remotely for this age group because they knew that not all children would get the help from a parent that was needed to complete it – 'it is more "busy time" than learning time'. There was a general view that, in order to work well, remote learning for children in the EYFS was reliant on parents, or needed significant direct input from staff through live lessons, both of which present challenges.

Many of the primary schools had not had to provide remote learning for pupils with SEND this term, but had plans for how this would work, sometimes based on what

they had tried during the summer term. Some leaders emphasised the importance of having personal contact with families when pupils with SEND were learning remotely, often through the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) making phone calls. Some leaders did, though, express some reservations about the limitations of remote education for their pupils with more complex needs and the demands that this could place on parents.

### **Expectations of remote learning in secondary schools**

Many secondary schools expected their pupils' remote learning day to follow the pattern of their usual timetable. Some leaders commented that family circumstances meant that there had to be some flexibility in what was expected. Most secondary school leaders reported that the content of the core subjects when taught remotely was aligned with the pre-existing curriculum. However, occasionally, schools chose to focus solely on consolidation. For example, one school told us for mathematics and English that:

'we don't want to move on. If we try to teach on remotely, it won't work. It's a mish mash'.

Schools had to make adaptations to their curriculum content and delivery in some subjects. In science, for example, teachers demonstrated experiments rather than pupils doing any practical work. In food technology, teachers sometimes filmed the practical cooking element in advance, which then formed part of the lesson. Some schools had thought about their curriculum sequencing in relation to remote education. For example, one leader said:

'although it is aligned with their usual taught curriculum, some things will be in a different order because some components do not work well delivered remotely'.

Examples given of a typical day included:

- 9am – pupils access work on class online platforms. Pupils follow the subjects they take (one hour per subject) but not necessarily in the same order on the timetable.
- Mirror image of school – all lessons are live streamed. Alternative tasks are set for practical subjects.
- Five compulsory lessons with instructions on a PowerPoint. Teacher will respond within 24 hours.
- 8.40am live registration – well-being check; tutor time – personal development; six lessons (live or streamed) – modelling the curriculum.
- 8.30am daily lessons posted online, including full timetable; pupil works through five set lessons and uploads work at the end of the day. Foundation subjects are adapted due to resources.

Many secondary school leaders talked about how challenging remote education can be for their pupils with SEND. Pupils with SEND sometimes found it difficult to understand what was required of them or to work their way around an online system independently. Some found that the whole experience raised their anxiety levels. Parents' frustration and anxiety was also an issue. Drawing on the experiences from the first national lockdown, many leaders were working on how to improve this aspect of their work. In some schools, staff had spent time teaching pupils with SEND how to use the online platforms properly. A few schools had also involved parents in this work, recording how things went and who might need more help if they had to self-isolate in the future. In some schools, TAs continued to follow the same timetable if the pupils were self-isolating, so would support the same pupils as usual in their lessons. The use of virtual 'inclusion rooms' was also a strategy used by some. Here, pupils were able to 'drop in' when learning remotely and receive prompt help with their work.

### **Monitoring attendance, engagement and progress**

Many schools of all types reported that they had systems in place to monitor pupils' access to or attendance at their remote learning, particularly when this was delivered using digital methods. Some platforms, for example, allow staff to monitor access and see the work submitted by pupils. Similarly, for live lessons, some schools reported being able to track easily who has attended or not. It is not as clear how schools that provide remote education through printed material and packs monitor whether pupils are using these daily.

Much of the monitoring appears to be related to whether pupils have accessed the lesson or completed the work. Few schools appeared to have systems in place to assess what pupils have learned from remote education. Some leaders noted that this was an area that they needed to refine. A few schools talked about methods that they were developing. Some schools, for example, said that work that is submitted digitally is being marked as usual. One school told us that they had created online quizzes that enabled them to identify which questions were not answered well and tailor future lessons around this. Some secondary school leaders said that they were finding some of the features in the online platforms that they are using useful in helping them to assess pupils' learning. Some collect and assess the work that has been done in physical work packs when pupils come back to school.

Feedback to pupils was another area that many schools reported needs further consideration and work. Schools were working out what was possible, reasonable and useful, depending on the different subjects and methods of delivery that they were using. It was seldom clear how self-isolating pupils were helped to catch up on missed learning on their return if the curriculum content in their remote learning did not align with what was being taught in school.

### **Staff training**

Training for remote education has evolved. In the previous briefing, we reported a strong focus on the setting up of online platforms and systems and the basics of

their use. This continues. Increasingly, however, schools are expanding their training to considerations of how the curriculum should be delivered remotely. For example, training was focusing on:

- how to create online resources including video footage and PowerPoint slides with a voiceover/narration
- how to assess and provide feedback remotely
- the pedagogy of online teaching.

More thought was being given to 'chunking' information appropriately and introducing pause points in lessons.

Some leaders still have qualms about the workload and/or the amount of training required for providing pre-recorded or live lessons. Others were adapting for digital use what they would normally teach in class and striving to 'keep everything the same but virtually'. Some leaders emphasised the importance of keeping in contact with pupils face to face. As one primary school leader put it: 'children like to see their teacher'. Leaders in many primary and secondary schools said that they had therefore trained their staff to provide live online or pre-recorded lessons and said that they were noticing staff's improved confidence in those areas. In one primary school, for example, leaders said that their teachers are now confident users of 'visualisers' in live-streamed lessons and demonstrations, for science and other subjects.

Even though leaders in many schools were observing the positive impact of training on their staff's ability to use technology for remote education, leaders in several schools pointed out that staff still had varying levels of confidence and skill. In one secondary school, for example, leaders described their teachers as 'grouped in equal proportions as proficient, developing and in need of more support'. In these schools, this aspect is perceived as one of the main challenges for remote education.

In a small number of schools (a mix of primary and secondary schools and pupil referral units), there was no formal training in relation to remote education. Instead, teachers were expected to develop their skills independently or subject leaders provided informal support, for example by editing and uploading teachers' videos for them if they had not had training on how to do it.

### **Improving the remote learning offer**

There is evidence that many leaders are reviewing their remote learning offer, thinking in various ways, in addition to staff training, about how to make it more effective for their pupils. Leaders in one secondary school, for example, talked about how they had developed their protocol for remote learning through discussions with staff and the student council. Pupils shared their preferences for the ways in which work could be presented. Some schools are now integrating the use of remote learning platforms into pupils' learning experiences when attending school, so that they are familiar with how to use them if self-isolating. This is getting around some of the potential issues of not being able to log on or use the platform, hence missing

lessons. Leaders also talked about auditing again to check whether pupils really do have sufficient IT resources at home. While many had done this at the start of the first national lockdown, experience had shown them that they needed to ask more questions to get a full and accurate picture, or ask them again.

In the previous briefing note, we found that some teachers' workload had increased due to the need to balance face-to-face teaching and plan for, or carry out, remote education for self-isolating pupils. We also outlined different approaches that some leaders had adopted to mitigate this challenge. While all this still applies, school leaders from a few schools had thought of additional solutions, such as teachers working together in year group teams to plan and deliver lessons remotely and partnering with another school to develop online learning.

Leaders reported many benefits of remote education and some, therefore, planned to improve it further and keep it beyond the pandemic. They saw it as being valuable for a number of reasons. Pupils can receive education even when they are not physically in school, for example due to a fixed-term exclusion or a medical reason or when the weather prevents attendance. Some leaders thought that the methods they were using could help improve the quality of cover work when leaders know staff will be absent, for example by using recorded lessons or PowerPoint slides with commentaries. Some leaders said that they planned to continue using online platforms for homework in the future.

### **The continuing challenges**

Despite all the positive work that schools are doing, some serious challenges remain. The first of these is digital access. While remote learning can be delivered in different ways, many schools are, as already reported, now using digital methods extensively. Issues arise when there are no digital devices or no internet access at pupils' homes, insufficient internet speed, or not enough devices to go around a family. Some schools had managed to purchase enough devices, for example Chromebooks, as well as dongles to provide 4G internet access. However, leaders in other schools were still struggling with these issues. Several said that they had not received what they needed from the government's laptop scheme and did not have enough budget to purchase what they needed themselves.

As at the time of our previous briefing, many schools acknowledged the importance of the role of parents in remote learning. Some were finding their way around this by offering more live lessons and other structured delivery through digital methods. However, particularly with younger children and those who found learning more difficult, including those with SEND, leaders thought that some degree of parental involvement was needed. Where this could not be given, for instance because parents were working, were not able to help their children to understand the task or could not motivate their children to work at home, leaders expressed concern that pupils were falling further behind.

Some leaders expressed concern about the lack of space that pupils have at home. Several described pupils living in cramped households, sharing bedrooms with

multiple family members or having a two-roomed apartment for a large family. In these situations, it is very difficult for pupils to find a suitable space in which to complete any remote learning.

## **How children were affected by the first national lockdown**

### **Catching up on lost learning**

In our previous briefing, we reported that there was no real consensus about the extent of pupils' learning loss. In these later visits, schools had had more time to assess pupils' learning. Many leaders in schools of all types thought that learning losses were extensive. Assessment is covered later in the briefing. Some leaders were also concerned that, when pupils have to self-isolate, they lose even more learning, particularly when this happens more than once to them.

### **Primary schools**

Most primary school leaders said that pupils had learning losses in many subjects. Many leaders said pupils were at the same level as they were before March – in other words, had learned little during the first national lockdown – or had even slipped back. Leaders talked about pupils being 'well below' where they should be; some others quantified this in terms of being six months. Not all leaders had the same view. A few said that pupils had come back with less learning loss than they had expected. As one put it, 'It just wasn't the tsunami of despair we were expecting'.

Many leaders said that younger pupils had been most negatively affected. Many had seen a negative impact on key stage 1 pupils' social and communication skills, listening skills, speech, phonic knowledge and gross motor skills. Regression in fine motor skills was a particular concern. Some pupils were unable to hold a pencil, when they could do so before. Some leaders said that Reception children were not as ready for school as they usually are. Leaders often talked about the varied experience that young pupils had had at home during the first national lockdown, and the impact that this seemed to have had on some of their skills when they came back to school.

Mathematics was an area of concern for many primary school leaders. In particular, they found that pupils had fallen behind in mathematical vocabulary, place value, recall, number, fluency and data handling. Even more leaders said that pupils had lost basic literacy skills. Losses in vocabulary were frequently mentioned. Reading and in particular phonic knowledge were of most concern to leaders. In addition, many leaders said that pupils had fallen behind and sometimes regressed in oracy, reading accuracy and fluency. This was having an impact on their understanding and, as a result, their confidence in being able to read. Some leaders mentioned that parents found it particularly hard to help their children with phonics at home. Losses in writing skills continue to cause leaders concern. Leaders found that grammar, punctuation, spelling and handwriting had all been affected by pupils' time away

from school. They were also concerned about pupils' skills of summarising, their sentence construction and their writing stamina. One leader said that pupils were writing in 'text speech'. Some leaders said that literacy-related learning losses had affected some pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) the most because they had not been speaking English during the first national lockdown.

Many primary school leaders did not think that the learning of pupils with SEND had been more affected than that of other pupils. Rather, they thought that the extent to which pupils were behind were related to the experience they had had during the first national lockdown. Leaders tended to think that pupils who had been in school had not lost out on learning, or had even benefited because they had had more individual attention. Leaders thought that some children with SEND who had remained at home had gained in some respects from the close attention. However, they were clear that, in common with many other pupils, many pupils with SEND had lost learning during the first national lockdown. Leaders tended to be most concerned about pupils with speech, language and communication needs, especially those who had not attended school. A few leaders thought that the learning of pupils with SEND had suffered disproportionately:

'They have been very resilient but there has been a massive decline in their academic performance when they returned.'

## **Secondary schools**

Many secondary school leaders said that pupils in all year groups had fallen behind in a range of subjects. Some others said that there was a mixed picture: most pupils had 'generally kept up' but some had significant gaps. Some attributed this to pupils' different experiences at home during the first national lockdown. Like primary school leaders, secondary school leaders often said that pupils had fallen behind in mathematics and literacy. Leaders referred to pupils' 'basic mathematical skills' having been affected, as well as specific aspects of mathematical knowledge and related skills. Leaders particularly mentioned pupils' knowledge of fractions, trigonometry and Pythagoras and how a lack of the component knowledge that is the foundation of mathematics was hindering their ability to problem solve. 'Basic literacy' was leaders' greatest concern with regard to English – again, spelling, grammar, punctuation and spoken English were all emerging issues. Some leaders said that that a lack of access to equipment in the first national lockdown had affected pupils' learning in subjects such as science, music, DT, PE and art. When pupils are still not able to do the practical elements of these subjects, often pupils in key stage 3, their learning continues to be affected.

Many leaders were particularly concerned about their Year 7 cohort and how they had fallen behind, particularly in English. They saw the lack of normal transition arrangements as a factor. Some leaders were also very concerned about Year 11 pupils and their preparedness for national examinations. A few leaders felt that lower-ability pupils had fallen behind more than their peers. Again, EAL pupils were of greatest concern to a few schools, if the pupils had not been speaking English at home.

Many secondary school leaders said that pupils with SEND had been affected more than other pupils by COVID-19, in different ways. Some of these leaders thought that the learning of pupils with SEND had been badly affected. Leaders talked about the loss of skills and knowledge and the concerns they had for pupils who had learning difficulties. Some attributed learning losses to pupils not just through having been out of school but also through not having found remote learning accessible or useful to them. A few leaders commented that pupils' reading skills had regressed.

There were some secondary school leaders who did not think that the learning of their pupils with SEND had been any more affected than that of other pupils, because they had been in school during the first national lockdown. Continuity of contact with these pupils was also seen as key. SENCos had often telephoned pupils and their families frequently and there had been intensive contact from TAs with those pupils with whom they usually worked. Occasionally, this contact had carried on through the summer holidays.

### **Special schools and AP**

The areas of learning in which pupils from special schools and AP had been affected most depended largely on their different needs, but also on their experience during the first national lockdown. As we reported in the previous two briefings, the loss of physiotherapy, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy was a particular factor, especially for pupils with more complex needs. Where these therapists are still not back in school working with the pupils, the impact continues.

Regression in communication skills, physical development and independence – for example, being able to eat independently – concerned many leaders. The social interaction skills of some pupils with autism spectrum disorder and some with social, emotional and mental health difficulties had been noticeably affected. Some AP leaders were also concerned about pupils having missed out on their work experience and their preparation for post-16 transition and some pupils' loss of physical fitness.

In other areas of the curriculum, special school and AP leaders' concerns were similar to those of mainstream school leaders – phonics, reading in general, mathematics and areas of the curriculum that needed practical work, such as science and music.

### **Pupils' behaviour and social, emotional and physical health**

As we reported in the previous briefing, leaders said that many of their pupils returned 'hungry' to learn, showing keenness and motivation. Many said that behaviour was also generally better and calmer than before and that pupils had adapted well to routines. Some leaders noted that staggered social times, starts and ends to the day were having a good impact on behaviour.

Despite these positives, many primary school leaders also talked about seeing more undesirable behaviours from some pupils. Some found it difficult to settle to work and seemed to have lost some of their independence and resilience, looking to adults for instruction and support more than they usually would. Quite a few secondary

school leaders also noticed that some pupils were struggling with maintaining good behaviour, especially those who had some behavioural difficulties before.

Some primary-aged pupils were struggling with social skills. A number of leaders said that they were seeing more instances of the youngest children not coping well with minor setbacks or having difficulties co-operating with others. In some cases, this had led to a breakdown in friendships. Leaders felt that some changes related to COVID-19 had had a negative effect on pupils:

- lack of after-school clubs and school trips
- lack of cross-year group 'buddying' programmes
- not being able to mix across bubbles
- not being able to leave a classroom to calm down.

A few leaders noted that, as a result, the personal and social development of their primary-aged pupils was behind where it would usually be at this point.

Some secondary school leaders had seen an increase in extreme poor behaviour by their pupils, such as aggression, fighting between pupils, and even assaults on staff. In some cases, these behaviours had led to permanent exclusion.

Anxiety has emerged as another challenge, according to many primary and secondary school leaders. According to some, this has mainly affected pupils with SEND, but others noted more generally that parents' anxiety was transferring to their children. Reasons for pupils' anxiety were related to the pandemic: some were anxious about catching the virus and infecting their households, while some were anxious about having to self-isolate and being unable to come into school. Leaders reported that pupils in Years 11, 12 and 13 were particularly anxious about the uncertainty of exams. Several secondary school leaders observed an increase in eating disorders among both girls and boys. A few also noted higher numbers of pupils self-harming, both in primary and secondary schools. Many leaders were concerned about the social and emotional impact that the time out of school had had on their pupils with SEND.

Some pupils' families were newly financially vulnerable, mainly due to job losses or furlough. Food poverty was negatively affecting pupils according to many leaders of secondary schools. Leaders had encouraged these families to access food banks and some provided additional support such as free breakfast clubs.

A few primary school leaders had observed increased use of mobile phones since pupils returned in September, particularly among younger pupils. These leaders said that parents had given them phones as this was the only way to keep in touch with friends during the first national lockdown. This led to increased use of social media. In one case, a primary school headteacher banned the use of phones in school after they noticed that pupils had become too dependent on them.

In terms of physical health, many leaders said that some pupils had gained weight over the first national lockdown, which was why some schools had introduced additional time for physical activities. A small number of schools reported an increase in hygiene problems and headlice.

## **Safeguarding**

Many leaders said that they had not seen many cases of newly vulnerable children or new safeguarding cases as a direct result of the pandemic. Rather, leaders noted that pre-existing cases had been exacerbated by the national lockdowns, due to difficult family situations deteriorating further. For example, some leaders reported an increase in cases of domestic violence since the first national lockdown. Some said that they had become aware of increased alcohol and drug misuse by parents at home. Many primary school leaders reported pupils' struggles over this period, including domestic violence, trauma or general lack of structure and routine.

A few leaders, including those of special schools, felt that a minority of pupils had become more vulnerable to criminal exploitation, for example knife crime, drug use in school, sexual assault, grooming and county lines. Some schools had given assemblies or tutor sessions to address this. Some leaders described cases of inappropriate use of social media by pupils. Leaders mostly described isolated incidents where a pupil had been interacting with strangers online, which had then become a safeguarding case.

## **How schools plan to maintain high standards in education**

### **Working towards full recovery**

Leaders have a sense of urgency about achieving a return to their usual curriculum. They were clear that they do not want to 'lose any more time' for their pupils. Nearly all leaders expected to be able to return to their usual, full curriculum by summer 2021. Many said that they were planning for a full return earlier than next summer.

Many leaders' confidence in their plans to return to their usual curriculum by next summer was rooted in the fact that they had maintained the full range of subjects for all pupils this term. A few also said that their remote learning provision was strong during the spring and summer and pupils' engagement was high, so learning loss was minimised, though this was not common. A few others were encouraged by pupils' progress so far this term. As reported in our previous briefing, key elements of leaders' plans for a full return included:

- streamlining and re-sequencing of curriculum content
- integrating missed material into the curriculum
- intervention programmes
- revision and catch-up sessions.

Some leaders also saw their improved remote learning provision as an important factor towards full return, because they were now confident that most pupils could continue to learn when they are not physically at school. However, our findings on remote learning, reported earlier in this briefing, suggest that the full curriculum is often not taught to primary-aged pupils when they are learning at home.

### **Establishing learning losses**

A range of assessment was being used in all types of schools, both formal and informal, formative and summative. Sometimes, leaders had focused their assessments on measuring overall attainment rather than assessing the taught curriculum and identifying gaps in learning. In primary schools, leaders appeared to be gathering the most detailed insights from their phonics assessments. In some schools, leaders had waited before carrying out formal assessments to allow pupils to settle back in at the start of term. Many schools were using 'gentler' in-lesson assessment activities such as low-stakes quizzes, 'live marking' and starter tasks to help to work out pupils' starting points, particularly in foundation subjects.

### **Barriers and solutions**

As we said in our previous briefing, there are a number of factors in play that are likely to influence the timing of schools' return to the full curriculum. Many leaders themselves said that achieving their aim was not straightforward. Leaders particularly cited, as potential barriers, staff and pupils needing to self-isolate, any future lockdowns that involved the closure of schools, pupils' access to technology and their engagement when learning from home. Leaders also highlighted that it may take longer than expected for pupils to catch up in some aspects of the curriculum, which would take time from the coverage of current curriculum content. Leaders noted that some of the current restrictions that are influencing their ability to deliver all elements of their curriculum are based on external guidance, hence not within their control.

In primary schools, there was a strong focus on returning pupils to the usual curriculum firstly in core subjects – though our discussions with leaders suggest that English and mathematics are receiving considerably more attention than science. As we reported in our previous briefing, some leaders were not yet clear about what learning had been missed in subjects other than English and mathematics, and how any gaps would be addressed. In addition, primary leaders were not always clear about how – or whether – the foundation subject curriculum content that is currently being lost due to more time being spent on English and mathematics would be covered. A few said that some missed content from some foundation subjects would not be covered or caught up on this year. Some secondary school leaders also did not yet have a clear overview of the aspects of learning pupils need to catch up on in different subjects. Some leaders said that as new content was taught, new gaps in pupils' prior knowledge were emerging, meaning that teachers were still getting to grips with the complete picture.

In planning a full return to their usual curriculum, alongside finding ways to cover content that was missed in the summer term, leaders were encountering some subject-specific challenges. For example, in subjects such as science and music, organising safe access to practical work for all pupils presents an issue. This has led to many leaders focusing on theoretical elements for some pupils, using more teacher demonstrations of experiments and making arrangements for sanitisation of equipment. More leaders, though, are now beginning to find solutions to these problems. For example, some secondary school leaders reported that they have new arrangements for room allocation and sanitisation arrangements (or plan for these to be in place imminently) so that more pupils are able to use specialist rooms and equipment to access practical elements of subjects. Others were providing practical work through 'classrooms on wheels', bringing resources to fixed bases so pupils could continue with practical work in subjects such as art, music and DT as much as possible.

In geography, creating safe opportunities for fieldwork is a current challenge. This is leading some schools to postpone units until later in the year or use the school grounds more, for example to develop map skills. Some schools were providing 'virtual field trip' experiences, using recordings and photographs of environments taken by teachers, secondary data and digital mapping tools.

In MFL, leaders referred to issues with grammar (such as use of tense), vocabulary and pupils' confidence with speaking and listening activities as the areas of most concern. This meant that some schools were making adaptations to focus units on developing these skills.

### **National assessments**

Some primary school leaders said that they felt they would be able to cover the required content ahead of national assessments for Year 6 next year. Many, however, referred to challenges with covering content in the usual depth, especially if there were blocks of time where bubbles of Year 6 pupils were self-isolating. Many secondary school leaders expressed concern over the time available to cover the content and prepare pupils ahead of national examinations next summer. Almost all commented that waiting for final clarification on the examination/assessment process is creating a real challenge. Some said that the combination of these factors was causing anxiety for pupils and staff.

As well as expressing concern about curriculum coverage, some secondary school leaders also felt that depth would be sacrificed in order to cover all material to at least some extent. Even with changes to examination specifications, a few leaders mentioned concerns about the time available for opportunities to deepen pupils' understanding and appreciation of more complex concepts, through practice, application of skills and essay writing. Most leaders said that they were providing additional revision and catch-up sessions, interventions and extra homework tasks to try to help pupils to cover what was needed. Many were also prioritising key stages 4 and 5 for access to practical work. One leader said, in relation to work with their

examination cohorts: 'we will throw the kitchen sink at it'. A few leaders said that there simply was not enough time to do what needed to be done.<sup>2</sup>

## Challenges for leaders

In the last briefing note, we reported on the increased workload and pressures senior leaders and teachers have been facing during the pandemic and outlined the sources of those pressures. All this still applies.

A few new findings have emerged in relation to teachers' well-being. The bubble structure in secondary schools is causing physical fatigue for some teachers, as staff – along with their resources – move from classroom to classroom. A secondary school leader explained that 'a teacher may teach 43 lessons across the fortnightly timetable and therefore move rooms 43 times'. Leaders suggested that in these scenarios, classrooms are no longer 'owned' by staff and are therefore neglected as learning spaces. Leaders in this school were planning to change this approach and achieve a better, but safe, balance of pupil and staff movement. In another school, leaders had provided staff with trolleys for resources. In a third, they had decided to keep the staff in the same classroom but clean the desks between classes. While adding to physical fatigue of some secondary school staff, the bubble structure was also adding to social isolation of staff. The usual 'socialising in the staffroom' that helps staff's well-being cannot take place across bubbles. Some leaders have counteracted this issue by keeping in touch with their staff and encouraging staff to contact each other through social media groups.

Many school leaders were struggling with the amount of workload due to a 'constantly fluid' situation, constant vigilance and responding to situations on a daily basis. These include:

- positive COVID-19 tests for pupils and staff
- tracking close contacts of positive cases
- the ongoing pressure of keeping everyone safe
- being 'on call' at all times including half term and evenings
- keeping abreast with the changing guidance from Department for Education (DfE).

One leader reported that at least two-thirds of their time is taken up with activities that are either indirectly, or directly, related to COVID-19. This is seen to take place 'at the expense of the strategic' and is having an impact on school improvement in some schools. In contrast, leaders in some schools said that they were managing to balance school improvement alongside COVID-19. Whether such a balance is feasible or not is likely to be dependent on a variety of factors, including:

- the size of the leadership team

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<sup>2</sup> These comments were all made before the government's latest announcements on examinations, on 3 December.

- the support from a local authority or multi-academy trust (MAT)
- the level of infection in the school and the area
- the extent of school improvement needed.

As touched on in the previous briefing, leaders in some schools that are currently judged to be inadequate were struggling to dedicate time to school improvement in view of the additional workload caused by the pandemic. Some were proud of the school improvement they had managed to bring about but feared that balancing that with operational (COVID-related) matters is not sustainable in the long term.

Working with other agencies remains a challenge for many leaders, particularly when it comes to other agencies supporting pupils directly. Primary school leaders' experience of working with other agencies to support their pupils with SEND was very mixed. One leader, for example, said:

'External agencies are involved, without issues. This is an improvement. The SEND team seem to have upped their game.'

Another commented, in relation to specialist support for pupils with visual impairments:

'An advantage with them working from home is they are easier to get hold of. They are sharing resources a lot more, which has been a bonus.'

These views about improved collaboration were shared by some other leaders. However, other leaders had contrasting views, saying that agencies were not coming into school or not providing any useful support. Some leaders (both in mainstream and special schools) saw this as the biggest barrier to the progress of pupils with SEND.

Leaders appeared to be struggling most with arranging suitable speech and language therapy for pupils who usually had this input. A few reported that these therapists would not come into school. Occasionally, leaders commented that therapists were wearing masks, which was a big issue. The physical condition of a few pupils who had not received physiotherapy had deteriorated significantly.

Some leaders were finding support from local authorities and MATs useful in managing some of these challenges. Some local authorities, for example, had summarised guidance from the DfE, held regular briefings for leaders, provided various training and given schools guidance on the curriculum. Many leaders of schools in MATs had particularly valued the support that their trust had given them to manage the assessment of risk, social distancing and setting up 'bubbles', as well as help reviewing safeguarding, attendance and behaviour policies so that new risks were accounted for and mitigated. Almost all leaders working in MATs acknowledged that the trust had helped them to put in place and further develop their remote education offer.

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

When we visited schools for the previous briefing, many were not clear about how they planned to spend their additional funding. This time, many had decided and actions were underway.

Primary schools were often using the funding to provide additional teaching, usually focused on reading, English more widely or mathematics. One primary school mentioned that they were intending to use the funding so that subject experts could be freed up from their normal role to help pupils to catch up with aspects of subjects as needed. In secondary schools, the most common use of the funding was paying for, or contributing to, additional or current staff to provide intervention classes – during school time, after school, Saturdays or in half term. These seemed to focus on mathematics and English. A few schools, both primary and secondary, mentioned that they were using the funding to access the national tutoring programme or to pay for tutors outside of this programme. Some special schools and AP were also using the funding for intervention work. There were no clear patterns for which year groups schools were focusing their interventions on. Across the visits, every year group was mentioned at some point.

Schools were also putting the funding towards investing in new resources. Some of these related to digital remote learning. For example, schools had bought:

- laptops and 4G dongles for pupils
- licences for programs and applications
- webcams for staff
- online ‘tutoring packages’ to help to identify where pupils have gaps in their learning and provide exercises to help to fill these gaps
- subscriptions to online GCSE revision packages
- subject-specific software that pupils can access from home.

In addition, some schools had invested in new books, phonics schemes and mathematics resources. Sometimes, the additional phonics and reading books were specifically for pupils to use at home.

Some schools mentioned that the funding was being used to pay for additional training for staff, usually related to the curriculum. Some had chosen to spend the funding on supporting pupils’ well-being, mental health and attendance, for example:

- employing a family support worker
- buying resources to help to improve pupils’ mental health
- expanding welfare teams
- buying additional education welfare officer time
- supporting poor attenders to improve their attendance

- paying specialists in bereavement, trauma and other aspects of mental health to support individuals
- providing play therapy for targeted pupils
- additional speech and language and occupational therapy provision.



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