



Department
for Education

Areas of Research Interest

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Purpose and background

The Government has five national Missions¹. These are:

- Kickstart economic growth.
- Build an NHS fit for the future.
- Safer Streets.
- Break down the barriers to opportunity.
- Make Britain a clean energy superpower.

The Department for Education (DfE) has lead responsibility for the Opportunity Mission. DfE works to provide children's services, education, and skills training that ensures opportunity is equal for all, regardless of background, family circumstances or need. We are the department for opportunity. We work to deliver better life chances for all – breaking the link between background and success. We do this by protecting children and ensuring the delivery of higher standards of education, training, and care. We create opportunities for children and learners to achieve and thrive today, so they have the freedom to succeed and flourish tomorrow, strengthening our society, powering our economy, and enabling equality. But we also have a role to play in the other four government missions, particularly the Growth Mission.

But what makes for good education and good children's social care is not always intuitive; we will not achieve our aims unless we learn from evidence and act based on knowledge of what is going to work. As an evidence-based department, we rely on a wide range of data, analysis, and research to inform strategy, policy, and delivery. This Areas of Research Interest (ARI) document sets out the key topics and questions where we welcome further evidence. It focuses on DfE's research interests relating to the Opportunity Mission but includes DfE's research interests related to the Growth, NHS, Safer Streets and Clean Energy missions, as we also have a contribution to make to these other missions.

There is, of course, already a large body of relevant evidence but it needs to be kept up to date, and in some areas, more robust and/or more granular evidence is needed. For example, to provide deeper knowledge of what works *for who, and in which contexts*, or to understand how to implement these approaches. This document reflects that variation in the volume and quality of existing evidence, as well as the need to ensure that established truths still hold, as well as the extent to which they hold in different settings.

We have specified our interests at a relatively high level to allow for research innovation. This is not an exhaustive list but aims to provide focus and direction on the topics where

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plan-for-change>

further evidence is most likely to be of practical value. We hope this document will enable researchers to develop robust plans that will ensure value and impact for their results.

The Opportunity Mission

The Opportunity Mission aims to break the link between a child's² background and future success. At DfE, we have a vital role to play in protecting children and ensuring high standards of education, training and care at all stages of their lives. We will deliver this across four key areas, or “mission pillars”:

- Setting every child up for the **best start in life**. This means delivering accessible, integrated maternity, baby, and family support services through the first 1,001 days of life; and high-quality early education and childcare to set every child up for success.
- Helping every child to **achieve and thrive** at school, through excellent teaching and high standards.
- Building **skills for opportunity and growth** so that every young person can follow the pathway that is right for them.
- Underpinning the other pillars is **family security** – ensuring every child has a safe loving home and tackling the barriers that mean too many families struggle to afford the essentials³.

Opportunity Mission Strategic Research Areas

The highest priority areas for strategic Opportunity Mission research and development span departmental boundaries and the Mission's Pillars. The areas specifically prioritised to inform the Opportunity Mission are:

- SEND: definition, early identification and thresholds for support (see the 'Best start in life' and 'Every child achieving and thriving' sections).
- Strategic Data and Analytics Capability (this links to, but is wider than, questions the 'Technology' section below).
- Supporting parents/carers to improve their home environment and ability to provide a home learning environment (see 'Best start in life' sections).

² For brevity, please read all references to children as encompassing both children and young people where appropriate throughout the document.

³ [Break Down Barriers to Opportunity - GOV.UK](#) Published 5 December 2024

- Understanding the role of technology for child development and wellbeing (see the 'Technology' section).
- Supporting clear career paths, strong skills offers and economic growth (see the 'Skills for opportunity and growth' sections).

We particularly welcome research and development in these areas.

Document Structure

We start with a list of priority areas of research interest for DfE in relation to each of the Opportunity Mission pillars below. Within each section we also draw out research questions for DfE which are relevant to the other four missions, highlighting which other missions they relate to. For example, 'Best start in life' and 'Every child achieving and thriving' include questions around development and health which are of relevance to the NHS mission. Similarly, 'Skills for opportunity and growth' includes questions relevant to the Growth Mission. Family security underpins the other pillars but also relates to the Safer Streets mission.

Some of the topics we consider under each of the Opportunity Mission pillar themes are relevant across pillars, and to other Missions. For example:

- Parents, carers, and the home environment are considered under 'Best start in life' and 'Family security' but are crucial throughout children's education.
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are primarily considered under 'Every child achieving and thriving' but there are areas of research interest relating to SEND elsewhere, for example regarding early diagnosis and action before children reach school (see 'Every child achieving and thriving'), and which are also relevant to the NHS mission.
- Similarly, health and wellbeing are key outcomes, alongside attainment, that we want to see at every educational stage and across our sectors. They are discussed under 'Every child achieving and thriving' because many of our current questions centre around the role of schools regarding health and wellbeing. (Again, this also links to the NHS and Safer Streets missions).
- Delivering the skills that are central to both the Opportunity and Growth Missions starts with foundational skills in the Early Years and continues throughout schooling, with important choices in school affecting children's subsequent opportunities. However, there are specific areas of research interest regarding further and higher education that are the focus in the 'Skills for opportunity and growth' section.

In addition, while we are working in partnership with other government departments to deliver the Opportunity Mission and to contribute to other missions, delivery of the Opportunity Mission is particularly reliant on our workforces and our infrastructure – both in relation to technology, and our physical estates and environment (with the latter also being related to the Clean Energy Mission). We therefore follow questions relating to the Opportunity Mission pillars with questions on these cross-cutting topics. We also highlight DfE's priorities for research investment in relation to these questions. We then expand on these high-level questions in the following, 'Detailed Areas of Research Interest' section.

Finally, we provide some advice on working with us, including how registered researchers can access our data, how we fund research, and details of the wide range of tools, methods and disciplinary approaches that may be relevant.

Priority Areas of DfE Research Interest

This section sets out the high-level topics where we are interested in further research evidence and analysis. More detailed sub-questions elaborating these interests are set out in the main section, 'Detailed Areas of Research Interest' from page 13 onwards.

Our starting point is one overarching question with 2 parts, which together have informed all our areas of research interest and should be considered for all of the questions that follow:

- What are the best (most cost-effective and scalable) ways that education and children's social care can increase opportunities and address disadvantage (socioeconomic and other forms) throughout children and young people's education and care journeys and into the labour market?
- When, where, how, and for whom do they work best?

Mission Pillar Areas of Research Interest

Best start in life

The early years in childhood are crucial to supporting opportunity. This pillar aims to set every child up for the best start in life, measured against the proportion of 5-year-olds reaching a good level of development in the early years foundation stage⁴. Key research topics include early identification of additional needs and supporting families to help children learn and develop, including through provision of high-quality childcare. Many of the questions for this pillar also relate to the NHS mission. The questions relating to 'Best start in life' are:

- How can we work most effectively in partnership with others to ensure that additional needs (especially regarding neurodiversity, speech and language and mental health) are identified and addressed as early as possible?
- What factors influence children's brain development from birth to the early 20s, and what works in supporting healthy brain development to enable learning? (See the 'Every child achieving and thriving' section)
- What are the most cost-effective ways to support parents and carers to help their children to learn and develop (from early years through to adulthood), including through play?

⁴ [Plan for Change – Milestones for mission-led government](#)

- Which early childhood services, or combinations of services, are most effective in improving the (health, cognitive, socio-emotional, and educational) development of disadvantaged children before age 5?
- How do we ensure that all children, particularly those in most need, can access and participate in good quality early learning?

Every child achieving and thriving

Every child and young person, regardless of their background, must be able to achieve and thrive, particularly at school, to develop the knowledge and skills they need for life. Thriving centres on both *feeling good* (having a high subjective wellbeing and a positive sense of belonging) and *doing well* (having a positive sense of accomplishment, autonomy, and physical and mental health). Our areas of research interest regarding this pillar of the Opportunity Mission span: attainment; SEND; attendance; health and wellbeing both in and out of school; school belonging and engagement; and enrichment activities and childcare for school-aged children. There are some clear links to the NHS and Safer Streets Missions here. The questions relating to 'Every child achieving and thriving' are:

- What works to raise attainment, taking account of different starting points and different contexts experienced by children, including the most disadvantaged?
- What teaching approaches and learning environments are most effective in helping children to concentrate, grasp new ideas, develop skills (such as writing), retain knowledge, transfer knowledge, and be motivated to learn?
- What teaching approaches, particularly through inclusion in mainstream education, would better support children with different types of Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) to achieve and thrive?
- What works best to ensure high levels of school attendance, when, where, with whom and why?
- How do improved mental and physical health and wellbeing support (including technological supports) improve behaviour, attendance, and attainment, and what works best to increase health and wellbeing across our sectors?
- What are cost-effective approaches to promote a sense of safety and school belonging, and ensure attendance and constructive behaviour in school, enabling children to be motivated and engaged?
- How can childcare for school-aged children best contribute to children's health, socio-emotional and educational outcomes?

- How do we ensure access to rich and engaging opportunities in and outside of pre-school and school settings, particularly for disadvantaged children? Which are the most cost-effective in helping children to achieve and thrive?

Skills for opportunity and growth

It is now Skills England's remit to explore skills needs and gaps, but available evidence has highlighted particular challenges in the financial sector, STEM, technology and green skills. DfE has a clear role here regarding the Growth Mission. DfE research interests for this pillar include enabling learners to make decisions that are informed by understanding the opportunities and support available, especially participation in further and higher education, and how continuing education affects their future opportunities. We also need to explore how our sectors can best prepare learners to take advantage of those opportunities, including in secondary education. We are especially interested in practices in further and higher education that engage less researched groups, such as those with care experience, those with SEND, experience of Alternate Provision, and children with a history of offending. However, the following questions are not just relevant to those sectors; for example, how different occupations and opportunities are conveyed to children at pre-school and school will influence their willingness to consider those paths in later life. The questions relating to 'Skills for opportunity and growth' are:

- How do we design and implement systems that promote understanding, and support the best decisions, by learners (of all ages) and parents (where appropriate) regarding the options and pathways available?
- What works to get disadvantaged children onto the pathways that are proven to lead to upwards mobility (including helping those who are not in education, employment, or training - NEET) and raising ambition where needed? At what age are interventions most effective?
- What are the best methods to teach and support learners in post-compulsory educational settings (whether vocational or academic)?
- How do we best create collaborations with industry to increase training opportunities, to ensure learners are as prepared as possible for work, and to reduce barriers to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in areas of high need and priority (e.g. Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths - STEM)?⁵
- To what extent will existing and planned educational provision meet identified future skills gaps in key areas of national importance?

⁶ We support HM Treasury's interest in why employer provided training has fallen and how this can be addressed – see [HM Treasury Areas of Research Interest - GOV.UK](#)

- What are the wider non-salary benefits of HE and FE for individuals, communities and society?

Family security

What happens in the home is a key driver of school experiences and attainment, and influences choices and outcomes. Keeping children safe from emotional and physical harm, tackling child poverty and supporting families will relieve pressure across the system and enable children to learn and thrive. Some of our research interests regarding family security also relate to our role in the Safer Streets Mission. The questions below reflect that action on child poverty is the focus of a new taskforce, jointly led by the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions⁶; ARIs relating to child poverty are therefore not currently detailed below.

Keeping children safe

We are interested in all types of safety including safeguarding at home and in care and online safety (see the 'Technology' section regarding online safety). The questions relating to 'Keeping children safe' are:

- What works best to identify and intervene early to support vulnerable children and their families before they enter the social care system?
- How can we better support families and children to keep children safe and, where possible, with their birth families?
- Where children cannot live with their birth parents, how do we support and enable others (including wider family networks) to provide good quality care which leads to better life outcomes?
- How can we ensure that multi-agency responses are coordinated effectively to reduce, and ideally prevent, young people's exposure to and experience of harm?

Family support

The questions relating to 'Family support' are:

- What family focused solutions work to ensure that children and their parents have the support needed to meet their basic needs for housing security and quality of life?
- How can we mitigate the factors that put stress on families and enable them to have suitable housing and good quality home environments?

⁶ [Child poverty taskforce - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/taskforces/child-poverty-taskforce)

- How can we best support children and adults who lack or have lacked family support (such as those who have experienced care) to maximise their opportunities to live a healthy and rewarding life?
- What are the most cost-effective ways to help where children are at risk as victims or perpetrators of crime? Does this vary for different groups of children, such as children with care experience, and by place?

Cross-cutting Areas of Research Interest

Workforce

Our previous ARI focused particularly on teachers, who are our largest workforce. However, we need further evidence to ensure that we have people *across all our sectors* with the best possible knowledge, skills, and experience, and who are motivated, inspired and enabled to deliver our Opportunity Mission. This includes ensuring we understand how and when specialists are best deployed in educational settings, and supporting all our workforces to use the best available evidence in their work. The questions relating to ‘Workforce’ are:

- What are the most cost-effective ways to recruit and retain our workforces? How does this vary across the education and children’s social care sectors (including relevant local authority staff such as educational psychologists), and at all stages of their careers (including recruitment into initial teacher training courses and late career recruitment)?
- How can we best develop and inspire our workforces across all our sectors to improve children’s outcomes, informed by the best available evidence?
- How and when are our specialist and support workforces (such as SENCOs, Educational Psychologists, and finance professionals) deployed? How does this vary and why (for example across regions, for different specialist workers such as children’s home staff), and between the state and independent school sectors)?

Technology

Technology, including digital technology and artificial intelligence, has great potential to transform lives, and to contribute to the Growth Mission. DfE has a clear role in developing our expertise to deploy digital technology well, and to help learners, families and carers to use it safely and judiciously, taking account of the need for a healthy balance of “screen time” and time away from screens. The questions relating to ‘Technology’ are:

- How can we ensure that technology (including Artificial Intelligence), supports child and adolescent development, learning and health at all stages, from early years to adult education?
- How can we harness the potential benefits of technological advances (such as increased productivity across our sectors, or better-informed decisions by learners about opportunities) while keeping children safe?
- How can the impact of digital technology be robustly measured, and implemented in a way that supports teachers and learners?
- What approaches or innovations are needed to support the efficient and safe handling of data within education and children's social care settings to achieve the best outcomes for children?

Buildings and Environment

This theme reflects the importance of our physical estates, not just to delivery of the Opportunity Mission but also in relation to the NHS and the Clean Energy Missions. The questions relating to 'Buildings and Environment' are:

- How can our estates (including school nurseries, schools and publicly provided children's homes) provide a suitable, healthy, and resilient environment for learning and to deliver our Opportunity Mission, and how can this be done in the most cost-efficient way?
- What is the environmental impact of our estates, what works in reducing their impact (when, where and why) and which adaptations are needed for our future climate?
- How many places and settings will be needed in our settings in future, what building designs work best, and where, when, and how should they be provided (taking account of costs, wider community resources, needs, and sense of belonging)?

Detailed Areas of DfE Research Interest

As highlighted above, our starting point is one overarching question with 2 parts, which together have informed all our areas of research interest and should be considered for all of the questions that follow:

- What are the best (most cost-effective and scalable) ways that education and children's social care can increase opportunities and address disadvantage (socioeconomic and other forms) throughout children and young people's education and care journeys and into the labour market?
- When, where, how, and for whom do they work best?

Mission Pillar Areas of Research Interest

Best start in life

The early years in childhood are crucial to supporting opportunity. This pillar aims to significantly improve child development by age 5, driving up outcomes and reducing the disadvantage gap. Key topics include early identification of additional needs and supporting families to help children learn and develop, including through provision of high-quality childcare. The questions relating to 'Best start in life' are:

How can we work most effectively in partnership with others to ensure that additional needs (especially regarding Special Education Needs and Disabilities and mental health) are identified and addressed as early as possible?:

- What approaches would enable the best (most consistent and reliable) identification of additional need, how early can they be used, how cost-effective are they, and how can they be used at scale?
- What are the characteristics of additional needs for children in the early years, with specific consideration of neurodiversity, speech and language, and mental health interventions?
- What are the links between genomics and SEND conditions, and how might we best prepare educators, care-providers, parents, and children for increased genomics data?

What factors influence children's brain development from birth to the early 20s, and what works in supporting healthy brain development to enable learning? (See also 'Every child achieving and thriving')

What are the most cost-effective ways to support parents and carers to help their children to learn and develop (from early years through to adulthood), including through play?

- How do children's home lives influence whether they can thrive and achieve throughout their lives? How do both their material and non-material living conditions affect their later outcomes?
- How can education and other services best support parents and carers to help their children learn outside formal education settings (including in other locations beyond the home when the home learning environment is not conducive to learning)?
- How well-used are available family services (such as family hubs and children's centres services) and how representative are these users? How can we make these services more attractive and easier to access for those parents and carers whose children stand to benefit the most?
- How do we improve connections and relationships between parents and professionals (e.g. through parental networks)?
- Which parenting programmes are most effective, especially in engaging disadvantaged parents and families with a social worker? Are they equally accessible to all families, including those that are hard to reach, and easily scalable?
- What more can be done to best support families with children under the age of 2, to give those children, particularly the most disadvantaged, the best start in life?

Which early childhood services, or combinations of services, are most effective in improving the (health, cognitive, socio-emotional, and educational) development of disadvantaged children before age 5?

- How does this vary by children's age (for example 0-2 and 3-5) and for different domains of learning (such as literacy and maths)?
- How can we identify those who will not achieve a good level of development at age 5, to help target early childhood services before school entry?
- How can we best develop tools to assess development before school-age, so we can measure important changes in educational outcomes over time and understand the relative impact of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and home learning environment?
- Which interventions in early years settings are most effective in supporting child development, for whom, when, where and why?

How do we ensure that all children, particularly those in most need, can access and participate in good quality early learning?

- What can we do to reduce barriers to take-up of childcare and to work, particularly for parents from disadvantaged communities?
- How can parental engagement in their children's early education best be enhanced, especially for those parents in disadvantaged households, and how does this vary for mothers and fathers?
- What is the optimal amount and type of early education in formal settings? How does this vary for different groups of children?
- What are the most effective ways to provide robust and effective early education, to ensure sufficiency of provision with a motivated and good quality workforce?
- What are the most effective system-level levers for replicating *high-quality* and *long-lasting* early years education across diverse settings (including schools, childminders, and communities)?
- How much do these levers act universally, and how much do they need adapting and/or targeting to support different groups of children (e.g. SEND, FSM) to achieve a Good Level of Development (GLD)?
- How can we better support school/setting leaders to drive improvements in early years education?

Every child achieving and thriving

Every child and young person, regardless of their background, must be able to achieve and thrive, particularly at school, to develop the knowledge and skills they need for life. Thriving centres on both *feeling good* (having a high subjective wellbeing and a positive sense of belonging), and *doing well* (having a positive sense of accomplishment, autonomy, and physical and mental health). Our areas of research interest regarding this pillar of the Opportunity Mission span; attainment; SEND; attendance; health and wellbeing both in and out of school; school belonging and engagement; and enrichment activities and childcare for school- aged children.

Attainment

The questions for 'Attainment' are:

What works to raise attainment, taking account of different starting points and different contexts experienced by children, including the most disadvantaged?

- How can we support all children to reach their potential, balancing high standards for all with support for those who need it most, including the most disadvantaged children?

- Which approaches to school leadership, management and governance help create the right environment for all children to learn, and how can they be more widely embedded?
- How can we limit administration to enable a focus on teaching and supporting children? (See also the section on Technology).
- What are the most cost-effective approaches to raise the performance of under-performing settings?
- How can we ensure that supporting organisations and policies (such as Multi-academy trusts and Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence teams) enable schools to improve?
- How can we better understand the link between governance and school performance (including both achieving and thriving)? How can we improve the diversity of governing bodies?
- How can schools best work with parents and carers to help their children to arrive each day ready to learn, to get the most from each school day and support their learning outside school?

What teaching approaches and learning environments are most effective in helping children to concentrate, grasp new ideas, develop skill (such as writing), retain knowledge, transfer knowledge, and be motivated to learn?

- How do these things vary for different groups, such as students with SEND, disadvantaged children and for different age groups? Why are these approaches most effective and how can we scale them up?

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

The questions for ‘Special Educational Needs and Disabilities’ are:

What teaching approaches, particularly through inclusion in mainstream education, would better support children with different types of Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) to achieve and thrive?

- Are there different developmental trajectories of cognitive, emotional, and social skills for different types of SEND, and if so, what does this mean for classroom pedagogical practice?
- What differences in support are needed across different educational settings (including early years, colleges, and Alternative Provision) to ensure the best support

for learners with SEND to thrive and achieve? What support can be universal, and which support needs to be targeted?

- What are the elements that need to be in place or adaptations that need to be made to mainstream schools and teaching practice to make education settings inclusive to children with different types of SEND (at the child, school, and system level?)
- What are the barriers to learning experienced by children with SEND, and what universal and targeted strategies and interventions are effective in helping them overcome these barriers? How do they vary depending on type of SEND?
- When and how should targeted and specialist support – including SENCOs, other specialist professionals, specialist units and special schools – be employed? What is/should be the role of in-school support units in supporting children and inclusive education?
- How can schools effectively monitor and evaluate the impact of provision they make for children with SEND? How should progress and attainment be assessed for those with different types of SEND?
- How can we improve outcomes for those who need a specialist placement, preparing them to be as independent and prepared for adulthood as possible? What do the best special schools do that could be replicated elsewhere, including in mainstream provision?

Attendance

The questions relating to 'Attendance' are:

What works best to ensure high levels of school attendance, when, where, with whom and why?

- What (individual, school and wider) factors contribute to different types of absences (low-level, persistent, and severe)? Are there significant differences in the root causes of these various types, or differences by age?
- What factors influence parental attitudes to school attendance and what can we do to address them?
- What types of practice and/or interventions (including both by schools and other parties such as local authorities), work to prevent or reduce the different types of absence (including low-level, persistent and severe absence) and how do they affect other outcomes (including wellbeing)?

- What conditions need to be in place for schools and/or local authorities to effectively implement these interventions?
- How do we ensure that all children have strong attendance during transitions from primary to secondary school? (See also 'Every child achieving and thriving' on transitions)
- What is the experience of those outside mainstream education (whether being home schooled, excluded from school, in Alternative Provision, attending special schools or Young Offender Institutions) and their parents? Where relevant: how and when could/should these children be helped back into mainstream education?
- What are the (individual and wider) costs of non-attendance across a child's lifetime, both in the short-term and long-term, and how do they vary for different groups?

Mental and physical health and wellbeing

The questions relating to 'Mental and physical health and wellbeing' are:

How do improved mental and physical health and wellbeing support improved behaviour, attendance, and attainment, and what works best to improve health and wellbeing across our sectors?

- What are the mechanisms for improving mental health and wellbeing and reducing the effect of poor mental health and wellbeing on students' behaviour, attendance, and attainment?
- What impact do educational settings and practices have on longer-term health (including dental health)?
- What contribution can education make to the resilience of the nation's future workforce (for example, by reducing absence caused by ill health)?
- How can the culture, leadership, and teaching in our educational institutions promote health, wellbeing, and attainment goals?
- How are educational institutions and the health sector working together to promote student wellbeing and to support children with more severe problems (e.g. Education Mental Health Support Teams)?
- How effective have whole school/college approaches to improving student mental health and wellbeing been? What factors underpin the most effective whole school/college approaches? How can they effectively measure the impact of these approaches?

- What works best in mitigating the adverse impacts of serious or prolonged ill-health (including long-covid) on educational achievement? What educational support is offered to children who have serious or long-term ill-health and how effective is that support?

School belonging, motivation, and engagement

The questions relating to 'School belonging, motivation, and engagement' are:

What are cost-effective approaches to promote a sense of safety and school belonging, and ensure attendance and positive behaviour in school, enabling children to be motivated and engaged?

- What drives differences in school belonging, motivation, and engagement between primary and secondary?
- What works to support transitions (including to primary school, to secondary school, within secondary e.g. from year 7 to year 8) for different groups, including children with SEND (including transitioning between different types of settings)? (See also 'Every child achieving and thriving').
- What are the most cost-effective school and classroom practices to help children develop positive relationships and pro-social behaviour at school and increase school attendance – especially for those children with challenging behaviour? How do these vary for different groups (and for those students with SEND, for different types of need)?
- How can staff best be supported in dealing with challenging behaviour, in ways that reliably reduce disruption to peers, improve pupil wellbeing, behaviour and attainment, and aid staff retention?
- How effective are trauma and resilience theory informed inputs for staff? Can teacher training about brain development, the stress response, co-regulation strategies and how to teach self-regulation improve student's behaviour in class and help children achieve?

Enrichment activities and childcare for school- aged children

The questions relating to 'Enrichment activities and childcare for school- aged children' are:

How can childcare for school-aged children best contribute to children's health, socio-emotional and educational outcomes?

- What models of provision (e.g. breakfast clubs, after school clubs, homework clubs and holiday provision) are most effective (for whom, when, where and why)?
- How can childcare for school aged children better support disadvantaged children and children with SEND?
- What enrichment activities (such as arts, cultural and sports activities) are available through childcare for school aged children? How and why does this vary (e.g. by place and age group) and how can we boost these opportunities for those most need them?

How do we ensure access to rich and engaging opportunities in and outside of pre-school and school settings, particularly for disadvantaged children? Which are the most cost-effective in helping children to achieve and thrive?

- What opportunities do children have at present for enrichment activities (including opportunities for play, especially outdoor play, breaks, and engagement with nature) and how does this vary by place, family, and personal characteristics? What are the barriers to take-up?
- What are the social, emotional, physical, and longer-term career benefits of enrichment activities?
- What is the impact of children's access to nature and outdoor learning from an educational and wellbeing perspective (including regarding environmental awareness as well as general behaviour, engagement, and attendance at school)? What are the different ways that outdoor learning can affect children and how can they be measured?

See also the 'Technology' section, which includes consideration of the relationship between technology, achieving and thriving.

Skills for opportunity and growth

As noted earlier, it is now Skills England's remit to explore skills needs and gaps; DfE research interests for this pillar include enabling learners to make decisions that are informed by understanding the opportunities and support available, especially participation in further and higher education, and how continuing education affects their future opportunities. We also need to explore how our sectors can best prepare learners to take advantage of those opportunities, including in secondary education. We are especially interested in practices in further and higher education that engage less researched groups, such as those with care experience, those with SEND, experience of Alternate Provision, and children with a history of offending. However, the following questions are not just relevant to those sectors; for example, how different occupations and opportunities are conveyed to children at pre-school and school will influence their

willingness to consider those paths in later life. The questions relating to ‘Skills for opportunity and growth’ are:

How do we design and implement systems that promote understanding, and support the best decisions, by learners (of all ages) and parents (where appropriate) regarding the options and pathways available?

- How are different careers portrayed to children? What careers advice is available, who engages with it, and what difference does the best possible careers advice make to the career paths they choose? How does this vary for different groups (such as by age and background)?
- How can careers advice have maximum impact in signposting people from disadvantaged backgrounds into further and higher education (including apprenticeships and T levels) and more rewarding careers? What is the optimum mode of delivery of information, advice, and guidance for disadvantaged groups and at what age should this start?
- How can we maximise the benefits of work experience for those students who lack social capital?
- What are the drivers of UK and foreign students’ decisions about pathways into and out of Higher Education (HE)? How do perceptions of the UK student experience affect decisions to study in the UK?
- What is the impact of funding and understanding of student finance on decisions to study, course type and mode of study (both for UK and foreign students? How are the debt, cost and value of student finance understood and experienced, by different social groups?

What works to get disadvantaged students onto the pathways that are proven to lead to upwards mobility and to stay on those pathways (including helping those who are not in education, employment, or training - NEET) and raising ambition where needed? At what age are interventions most effective?

- How can the skills system best support disadvantaged students into sustainable employment?
- What works best in the skills system to support underrepresented groups into higher-paid occupations, sectors, and levels of seniority?
- How do local availability of courses and transport infrastructure impact on disadvantaged groups’ opportunities and choices, and what works to improve them?

- What works in driving successful HE participation and positive destinations post HE, for disadvantaged groups (including care experienced students), and other groups such as those with SEND?
- What incentives to both employer and potential apprentice will facilitate more individuals entering the workforce via apprenticeships?
- How can the Skills and Growth Levy be used to widen opportunity?

What are the best methods to teach and support learners in post-compulsory educational settings (whether vocational or academic)?

- What is effective practice in pedagogy and curriculum design in technical education, apprenticeships, and adult training, how does this vary by student characteristics, and how can we scale it up?
- Where are the barriers to delivery of high-quality courses, and how might these be overcome?
- How fully are different disadvantaged groups and those with SEND enabled to participate in further and higher education? How well is existing support working and is it sufficient to ensure equity of opportunity in further and higher education?
- What additional ongoing support (e.g. mentoring) will facilitate disadvantaged groups entering and staying in training post-16?

How do we best create collaborations with industry to increase training opportunities, to ensure learners are as prepared as possible for work, and to reduce barriers to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in areas of high need and priority (e.g. Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths - STEM)?⁷

- What are the barriers and challenges within the labour market that prevent adults from disadvantaged backgrounds having good outcomes, even if they have the same attainment outcomes (e.g. networks, local labour market factors, social capital etc)? How does this vary for different groups (e.g. adult offenders)? What are the most cost-effective ways to address them?

To what extent will existing and planned educational provision meet identified future skills gaps in key areas of national importance?

- How can we best ensure appropriate availability of educational opportunities to meet future needs? How do solutions vary over the short, medium, and long term?

⁶ We support HM Treasury's interest in why employer provided training has fallen and how this can be addressed – see [HM Treasury Areas of Research Interest - GOV.UK](#)

- How can we help the UK HE sector to be internationally competitive and financially secure while meeting key domestic needs?
- How can we create a culture of lifelong learning? What would an optimally designed lifelong learning entitlement look like to enable adults to drop in and out of ongoing training without compromising their financial stability? What incentives might change the national culture (for employers and employees) about lifelong learning?

What are the wider non-salary benefits of HE and FE for individuals, communities and society?

- What are the benefits of HE and FE on individual wellbeing, physical and mental health, societal engagement, and long-term employment?
- What are the wider societal benefits of HE and FE study and provision (including the local and national benefits generated by HE/FE providers)?
- Are these benefits shared equally or do some groups benefit more than others?
- Do these benefits vary by the type of HE or FE study e.g. full degree or short courses, institution (university or FE college) or mode of study?
- How can the wider benefits be more effectively conveyed to different groups early on in education to raise aspirations?

Family security

What happens in the home is a key driver of school experiences and attainment, and influences choices and outcomes. Keeping children safe from emotional and physical harm, tackling child poverty and supporting families will relieve pressure across the system and enable children to learn and thrive. This also contributes to the Safe Streets mission. The questions below reflect that action on child poverty is the focus of a new taskforce, jointly led by the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions⁸; ARIs relating to child poverty are therefore not currently detailed below.

Keeping children safe

We are interested in all types of safety including safeguarding at home and in care and online safety (see the 'Technology' section regarding online safety). The questions relating to 'Keeping children safe' are:

⁸ [Child poverty taskforce - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/taskforces/child-poverty-taskforce)

What works best to identify and intervene early to support vulnerable children and their families before they enter the social care system?

How can we better support families and children to keep children safe and, where possible, with their birth families?

Where children cannot live with their birth parents, how do we support and enable others (including wider family networks) to provide good quality care which leads to better life outcomes?

- How does this vary for different family types, including both formal and informal kinship carers, foster carers, and children who leave care under an adoption order or special guardianship order?
- How effective are changes to the residential care market in ensuring the right number and types of good quality, stable registered places across the country, which provide good value for public money?
- How can we ensure staff maintain stable relationships with the children and families that they work with where appropriate to counter disruption in other aspects of their lives?

How can we ensure that multi-agency responses are coordinated effectively to reduce, and ideally prevent, young people's exposure to and experience of harm?

- How do we ensure that front line staff have access to all the relevant information from across systems and agencies, to ensure effective decision making in provision of support?

Family support

The questions relating to 'Family support' are:

What family focused solutions work to ensure that children and their parents have the support needed to meet their basic needs for housing security and quality of life?

How can we mitigate the factors that put stress on families and enable them to have suitable housing and good quality home environments?

- How much information and understanding do education providers across our sectors have about students' home circumstances, and what adjustments do they make?

How can we best support children and adults who lack or have lacked family support (such as those who have experienced care) to maximise their opportunities to live a healthy and rewarding life?

What are the most cost-effective ways to help where children are at risk as victims or perpetrators of crime? Does this vary for different groups of children, such as children with care experience, and by place?

- What are the risk factors, journeys and outcomes for victims/survivors and perpetrators of violence against women and girls (VAWG), knife crime, serious violence, and sexual violence?
- How can we best identify and intervene early to support children at risk of violence from becoming victims and/or perpetrators of it?
- What is the role of school absence and mental health in youth crime, and what is the role of school belonging in keeping at-risk young people in school and out of crime?
- What is the role of the children's social care system in keeping vulnerable children out of trajectories into crime?
- What is the role of relationships and sex education (RSE) in preventing and/or mitigating the impacts of violence against women and girls, and how can it be delivered most effectively?

Cross-cutting Areas of Research Interest

Workforce

Our previous ARI focused particularly on teachers, who are our largest workforce. However, we need further evidence to ensure that we have people *across all our sectors* with the best possible knowledge, skills, and experience, and who are motivated, inspired and enabled to deliver our Opportunity Mission. This includes ensuring we understand how and when specialists are best deployed, and supporting all of our workforces to use the best available evidence in their work. The questions relating to 'Workforce' are:

What are the most cost-effective ways to recruit and retain our workforces? How does this vary across the education and children's social care workforces (including relevant local authority staff such as educational psychologists), and at all stages of their careers (including recruitment into initial teacher training courses and late career recruitment)?

- What factors influence labour market choices and how do they vary for different groups, parts of the workforce, including at a sub-national level? This includes the role

of non-pay factors such as workload, wellbeing and flexible working and their relative importance⁹.

- What influence do practices such as professional supervision/reflective practice have on staff retention and how widespread are these practices?
- How can we promote resilience and wellbeing among our workforce cost-effectively?
- What are the drivers, barriers, costs, and benefits of movements across our workforces?
- What are the characteristics and motivations of returners to the education and social care workforces?

How can we best develop and inspire our workforces across all our sectors to improve children's outcomes, informed by the best available evidence? We are particularly interested in analysis that looks at outcomes in terms of practice improvement.

- What underpins and drives workforce performance across our sectors, including teaching quality, quality of leadership and quality of delivery by specialist staff?
- How can we best measure quality and effectiveness within our workforces (taking account of the range of outcomes we want to deliver)? How does this vary for different types of workers and at different stages in their careers?
- What are the features of the design and delivery of cost-effective professional development, at scale? Why are these features effective?
- What professional development is most appropriate at different career stages? How does it vary between different parts of the workforce and for different groups?
- What new or additional knowledge and skills (including what *level* of knowledge and skills) do our workforces need (including in equipping our workforces to support children with SEND)?
- What development opportunities are available for our workforces, how well do they meet our needs, and how attractive and accessible are they? Given the importance of professional development to retention, what are the best ways to ensure there are sufficient attractive and accessible development opportunities which engage the right people?

⁹ HM Treasury is also interested in this question: see [HM Treasury Areas of Research Interest - GOV.UK](#) published 11 November 2024

- How do we best update our workforce skills and knowledge to reflect changing needs and evidence (for example regarding knowledge of climate change, and knowledge and skills in using technology)?
- What difference does professional development of our workforces (including for specialist and support workforces and early years practitioners) make to children's outcomes?
- What can we learn from other parts of the public sector, other sectors, and other programmes (e.g. NHS, parenting programmes) about professional training to develop knowledge and skills (e.g. about child development, on behaviour management, on how to improve leadership skills, how to improve workforce wellbeing, and how to use evidence)?

How and when are our specialist and support workforces (such as SENCOs, Educational Psychologists, and finance professionals) deployed? How does this vary and why (for example across regions, for different specialist workers such as children's home staff), and between the state and independent school sectors)?

- Are there barriers affecting the availability of specialists (including for example, subject specialist teachers)? How might they be addressed?

Technology

Technology, including digital technology and artificial intelligence, has great potential to transform lives, but we need to develop our expertise to deploy them well, and to help learners, families and carers to use them safely and judiciously, taking account of the need for a healthy balance of "screen time" and time away from screens. The questions relating to 'Technology' are:

How can we ensure that technology (including Artificial Intelligence), supports child and adolescent development, learning and health at all stages, from early years to adult education?

- What impacts does social media use and screen time have on brain development, behaviour (including engagement in other activity), attainment, and health? How does this vary for different groups (including by age) and for different types of use?
- What factors and characteristics support healthy use of technology (such as mobile phones and tablets) by children of different ages, and what impact do they have?
- How can we equip parents, families, and carers to support children through safe access and use of technology outside educational settings?

How can we harness the potential benefits of technological advances (such as increased productivity across our sectors, or better-informed decisions by learners about opportunities), while keeping children safe?

- What are the potential long-term opportunities and challenges of AI use across our sectors, and at all education stages?
- In what ways can AI and other digital technology reduce workload, improve teaching quality, help track progress and improve outcomes? How can AI and digital technology impact on productivity, efficiency, and costs?
- How can digital and assistive technology support learners with SEND, including to participate in mainstream education settings?
- How do AI and other digital technologies support existing ways of working across our sectors? What are the main opportunities for the future?
- How can AI and other emerging technologies be implemented in our settings so that they do not widen existing inequalities or create new inequalities?
- How has the increased accessibility of generative AI influenced our sectors (including schools, colleges etc)?

How can the impact of digital technology be robustly measured, and implemented in a way that supports teachers and learners?

- How can we adapt research methodologies to robustly measure the impact of technology in education, given its fast-moving nature?
- How do device ratios impact students and teachers? What is the minimum effective ratio of devices to students? How does this vary according to student characteristics including age?

What approaches or innovations are needed to support the efficient and safe handling of data within education and children's social care settings which leads to better life outcomes?

- What are the security risks associated with AI and other digital technology within the educational and children's social care estates? What is best practice for cyber security in our institutions how can we scale this across the estate?
- What are the best ways to ensure that AI and other digital technology are used safely, ethically, and in ways that protect the data and interests of children, our workforce, and bodies? What forms of collaborative working, regulation and enforcement may be appropriate?

- What models of management and professional development of frontline and back office roles support efficient and safe use of data and technology including AI?
- What resources are required to ensure the safe and efficient handling of data in education and children's social care?
- What innovative approaches to data in education and children's social care could increase staff capacity and reduce workload?

Buildings and Environment

This theme reflects the importance of our physical estates, not just to delivery of the Opportunity Mission but also in relation to health and the Clean Energy Mission. The questions relating to 'Buildings and Environment' are:

How can our estates (including school nurseries, schools and publicly provided children's homes) provide a suitable, healthy, and resilient environment for learning and to deliver our Opportunity Mission and how can this be done in the most cost-efficient way?

- What mitigations are needed in our buildings, and what mitigations are used, to minimise the spread of infectious diseases and contribute towards a healthy and resilient environment?
- How can building design (including accessibility, boundaries, heating, ventilation, and outside spaces for play, sports, relaxation, and connection with nature) help our workforces, children and students achieve and thrive?
- How might we adapt existing buildings and their management to provide a healthier and more resilient learning environment?
- What is effective in the management of our estates (especially the school estate), including outdoor spaces? What can be done to improve management of the estates and monitoring of their performance?
- What factors contribute to the air quality in and around schools and other educational and social care settings, and what can the education and social care sectors do to address air quality in and around those settings?

What is the environmental impact of our estates, what works in reducing their impact (when, where and why) and which adaptations are needed for our future climate?

- How do the environmental risks posed by climate change (e.g. flooding and overheating) impact student outcomes, and how can settings adapt to limit the impact on education and pupil/student wellbeing?

- What are the most effective education strategies for promoting behaviour change toward sustainable lifestyles among different demographic groups (considering the potential for 'climate anxiety')?

How many places and settings will be needed in future, what building designs work best, and where, when, and how should they be provided (taking account of costs, wider community resources, needs, and sense of belonging)?

The next section provides advice for researchers who may want to work with DfE, including accessing DfE data, funding, and the types of approach we particularly wish to encourage.

Working with Us

The DfE conducts and commissions a wide range of research, analysis, and long-term studies to support policy development and decision making. Alongside this we want to harness the power of the UK and international research sectors and our unique data assets, to grow the evidence base in a range of areas.

Our ambition is to use this ARI document as a platform to build our external research engagement, drawing on colleagues across government, academia, research funding agencies, research providers and more. We already engage widely with external research bodies, academics, and research funders in a variety of ways, but we plan to do this more systematically using this Areas of Research Interest document through a programme of external research engagement.

We have received grant funding from Administrative Data Research (ADR) UK for our Data Access and Engagement Programme that runs from 2023 to 2025 to make it easier and faster for accredited researchers to gain access to the data they need. We are using this to share more data through the ONS Secure Research Service using the legal gateway provided by the Digital Economy Act. There is further information below about accessing these data, funding, the types of outcomes we are interested in, and the types of evidence we are interested in seeing.

The programme is also engaging with research bodies and academia, facilitating in depth-conversations about evidence needs and current research. We have taken account of these conversations in producing this document and plan to continue to iterate it in the light of these discussions: there is further information below about how contact us below.

Accessing Data

DfE gathers a wide range of data for administrative purposes. Much of this data can be made available for research, provided users follow rules and standards to prevent its misuse. We produce official statistics on:

- early years
- schools
- further education
- higher education
- children

- Local Authority service delivery

This is carried out in line with the [code of practice for official statistics](#) and [DfE official statistics: standards and policies](#). Further details about our statistics can be found in the [Explore Education Statistics](#) service. We also undertake a range of research studies including some large, national studies which collect data from children as they move through different phases of education. These are known as longitudinal survey studies. Strategic, longitudinal surveys include:

- [the second Longitudinal Study of Young People in England \(LSYPE2\)](#)
- [Children of the 2020s study](#)
- [Five to Twelve](#)
- [Growing up in the 2020s](#)

Where possible we make these datasets available to researchers. Open datasets can be found at [Explore Education Statistics](#) service and more granular data is available for accredited researchers, typically through the [ONS Research Accreditation Service](#) (ONS RAS), including for the following:

- the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) study
- the Growing Up in England (GUIE) dataset
- the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (CEYSP)
- the Further Education Workforce Data Collection (FEWDC)

More datasets will be made available over time and information on the data that is held can be found here: [Discover secure research data - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#).

Researchers must apply for access to all other DfE data through the [DfE data sharing service](#). More information about applying for DfE personal data can be found here: [Apply for Department for Education \(DfE\) personal data](#).

DfE holds numerous datasets in the National Pupil Database (NPD), these fall within four categories:

- Demographics
- Attainment

- Absence and exclusion, and
- Children in need and Children looked after.

Use [this tool](#) to find and explore information about the data that is held in the NPD, before applying to access.

If you would like to know more about how DfE shares its personal data, read [How DfE shares personal data - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).

If you are not sure whether to apply through DfE or ONS, please contact data.sharing@education.gov.uk.

More general information about our research, including details of our research publications can be found at [Research at DfE - Department for Education - GOV.UK](#)

We would welcome advice about other datasets it may be useful for us to know about.

Funding Routes

We hope that this document will help those applying to funding bodies by enabling proposals for new research to draw a direct line to the Department's ARI and strengthen the case for the possible public impact of the research.

We plan to use this Areas of Research Interest document as the starting point for a programme of engagement with researchers and research funders. We want to be able to discuss and share interests and priorities, making it clearer where funding opportunities may be available. Alongside making our interests clear, we are making significant efforts to ensure that our data is more readily accessible to accredited researchers, making it available through the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Secure Research Service (SRS) under the terms of the Digital Economy Act (DEA). We hope, through systematic engagement, to be able to develop a more dynamic research ecosystem where research, data and funding opportunities are more visible and readily accessible.

Please note, however, that the department cannot respond to speculative approaches for research funding as we commission specific research needs competitively. Information about other education research funders can be found in the British Academy and Royal Society report, "[The Landscape of Educational Research in the UK](#)" (2024).

Focus on outcomes

Across our research questions, we seek research which improves outcomes for children and staff, as well as services across our sectors, such as the examples set out below. As

part of this, we are keen to see research which generates improved estimates of impacts and value for money.

Outcomes for children and staff

These might include:

- improved recruitment and retention of teachers
- improved physical health and mental health of children, including a sense of school belonging
- improved attainment reflecting improved understanding and retention
- reduced teacher workload
- reduced persistent absence.

Outcomes for services

Improvements might include increased efficiency and reduced burden and costs across all parts of the education sector, from early years settings to schools and colleges.

We are interested in outcomes over different timescales, including longer-term where existing evidence often focuses on short-medium term outcomes.

We are interested in how and why both types of outcome vary by place, as well as in variation between individuals, demographic groups, and institutions (school etc).

Robust evaluation is essential for delivering the Opportunity Mission; our Evaluation Strategy¹⁰ sets out our approach to evaluation and provides detail about how evaluation can support DfE in contributing to the government's mission-based approach.

Tools, methods, and disciplinary approaches

Across all these topics we are keen to see a range of techniques and approaches used and are particularly interested in analysis that considers the potentially transformational impact of AI and related data analysis across our sectors. We encourage work from a variety of perspectives, whether evaluating existing programmes, tackling gaps in policy, addressing implementation problems or scalability and proposing innovation.

To deliver research and innovation which enable a step change in policy and practice, we need to expand capability and capacity and encourage interdisciplinary collaborations in

¹⁰ [Evaluation Strategies from UK government departments - GOV.UK](#)

specific research disciplines. We welcome analysis that goes beyond describing problems and starts to establish causality or explain mechanisms for change.

Data analytics

Analysis of large-scale data from across our sectors is possible for a range of research priorities, including:

- improving performance
- understanding patterns underpinning outcomes
- increasing the effectiveness of interventions

We are keen to see exploratory and/or diagnostic work using advanced data analytics, and to explore the potential which will be created by the introduction of a single common identifier.

Systems thinking

The education and care system is a complex system and changing the status quo will only be possible by looking at all parts of the system, understanding how they connect, where they are amenable to intervention, and expanding the range of options available for solving the problem. We are especially interested in research that helps illuminate how we can evaluate preventive spending and research that considers how DfE can help our sectors to build effective partnerships with other organisations which help break down barriers to opportunity.

Economics of education

Economic expertise is required to understand and improve the cost effectiveness of educational and care services to ensure that they deliver economic and educational benefits. We are particularly keen where applicable to see research which includes cost benefit analysis, which provides findings in terms of lifetime earnings or months of progress, for example.

User voice

We are especially interested in research methodologies that help make parents (especially fathers, for whom we have less evidence than mothers), families and children more visible in policy decisions and amplify their voices, especially those of the most vulnerable, to help break down barriers to opportunity from birth. This includes learning from success stories.

Behavioural science

Social, behavioural, and anthropological perspectives are welcomed to ensure that policies and initiatives are designed to be feasible and scalable, as well as effective.

Implementation science and use of real-world evidence

Understanding how to make interventions work effectively in practice, at scale and in different contexts is critical to converting what we know works into changes in policy and practice.

Natural sciences, cognitive sciences including neuroscience, and engineering

We value insights from a wide range of scientific fields, including natural sciences (such as health and environmental sciences), and more applied sciences such as engineering to provide cross-disciplinary evidence to inform policy development and understand wider impacts of interventions.

Evidence synthesis

Timely, policy-facing synthesis of bodies of evidence are needed to inform policy making, including meta-analyses, systematic and rapid evidence reviews, and syntheses of qualitative evidence.

Evidence from across the UK

Devolution in the UK enables different approaches to be taken to tackling common challenges, and therefore offers potential for all levels of government to learn from each other about “what works” in different policy areas. DfE is keen to support this on policy areas relevant to the Department’s work and to facilitate evidence sharing and learning with decision makers in Devolved Governments and local government. Alongside this, we are keen to see evidence from all parts of the UK, and to see evidence which considers the importance of place, both in experiences of opportunity and in shaping practices and what works.

International comparisons

We are interested in understanding how we compare to other countries, especially in learning from other countries which have been more successful in breaking down barriers to opportunity, and which might inspire innovative approaches.

Horizon scanning and futures techniques

We would welcome innovative analysis that helps us shape and prepare for the future.

Get In Touch

If you would like to discuss previous, ongoing or potential research into any of the areas

in this document, please contact research.engagement@education.gov.uk Please note we may share your details within the Department with relevant colleagues and use your details to contact you about your work or relevant events; we will not share your details beyond the Department without your permission. Please also note that we cannot respond to speculative approaches for research funding as we commission specific research needs through competitive tender: information about tendering for research and other funding opportunities is available on [our website](#).

This document is part of a broader engagement between the department and the research community, and we welcome information about relevant research, and feedback on this document, through the above inbox.



Department
for Education

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