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An analysis of manifesto plans for education

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About the Education Policy Institute

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Foreword

Natalie Perera, Chief Executive, Education Policy Institute

Following the pandemic's disruption and over a decade of austerity, the education system in England faces a number of challenges in the years ahead. Last summer we published the first part of our general election work in which we set out the challenges facing the education system in England and what we believed any incoming government should do to help address those challenges across the early years, school organisation and outcomes, post-16 and higher education, school and college funding, and the education workforce.

International comparisons show that England's high attaining pupils are on a par with some of the highest performing countries in the world. But our biggest challenge is a long tail of low attainment that is correlated with economic disadvantage, special educational needs, and particular ethnic groups.

Our annual report, published in October, highlighted just how far we are from an equitable education system. By the time they complete secondary school, pupils from low-income backgrounds are 19 months behind their more affluent peers. Around forty per cent of this gap is evident before children even start school. The pandemic made the situation more challenging, and its affects were felt more acutely by pupils from low-income backgrounds, but progress had stalled before then. The pandemic simply wiped out what little progress had been made.

In our first report we identified a range of challenges, including recruitment and retention in the early years and in schools, high levels of pupil absence, increasing prevalence of mental health issues amongst children and young people, and the financial sustainability of HE institutions.

Despite these challenges, there remains a genuine risk that education will not secure the profile it requires given wider economic issues and demands on public services. Heading into the election period, the public's key issues were the economy, the NHS, inflation, and immigration. Education was in eighth, perhaps reflecting the resilience of the system to keep going in the face of multiple challenges.[1]

In this second report we provide an independent, evidence-based assessment of the extent to which each of the main parties have committed to meeting the challenges in the system in the run up to the July 4 general election.

Whilst our focus is on education, any government that is serious about addressing educational inequalities must also tackle the social determinants of educational outcomes. Research published during this election period has highlighted the strain that hardship is putting not only

[1] Ipsos, 'The future of public services: navigating the storm', (May 2024)

on the individuals concerned, but also the services, including schools, they access.[2] We call again for an incoming government to put in place a credible cross-government child poverty strategy.

[2] Katie Schmuecker and Morgan Bestwick, 'The impact of hardship on primary schools and primary and community healthcare', (June 2024)

Executive summary

The report is structured around five priority areas for education in England:

- The early years
- School organisation and outcomes
- Post-16 and higher education
- School and college funding
- Education workforce

Each priority area includes a summary of the challenges from our first report, including the actions we think are needed. We then go on to assess party proposals against these objectives and the extent to which they are likely to meet them.

As education is a devolved issue, and the UK Parliament only has control over education in England, this project considers policy implications for England only. As such we have restricted our analysis to parties seeking election for constituencies in England.

General elections attract candidates from parties large and small as well as number of independent candidates. Therefore, we have had to set conditions for which parties are included. We have worked to the principle of including any party that might reasonably have a direct influence, either as a governing party or as part of an alliance, over government policy in the next parliament. We include any party which:

- was polling at least 10 per cent at the point of dissolution;[3] or
- had at least one seat (in England) in Parliament at the point of dissolution, and was polling at least 5 per cent at the point of dissolution.

The parties included are therefore: Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Green, and Reform. We assess policies where the party has made a clear public statement either through a manifesto or through its official website or social media accounts. In the absence of a clear policy statement, we have assumed a continuation of existing policy.

To what extent do the parties deliver against the challenges facing the system?

Conservatives

Pledges to provide bonus payments to early career STEM teachers, along with the opening of new special free schools will go some way to helping to tackle capacity issues in the school workforce and special educational needs system – though the time taken to open new special free schools mean that this approach will not provide a 'quick fix'. The party's commitment to reinstate plans to create a register for children not in school and to expand coverage of mental health support teams are also welcome policies in supporting vulnerable children and young people. The

[3] We have used the average of polls as at the 30 May 2024 on the BBC News website https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68079726

introduction of the Advanced British Standard also has the potential to provide young people with a broader post-16 offer, realigning us with other nations.

However, other policies such as a statutory banning of mobile 'phones in schools, lifting the cap on faith school admissions and scrapping 1 in 8 degree courses are largely unnecessary distractions and would not address the most pressing challenges facing education today.

Furthermore, in a period of falling pupil rolls, the Conservatives' plans to protect per-pupil funding in real terms would lead to cut in the overall schools budget. Disappointingly, there are no commitments to target funding towards disadvantaged pupils in the early years or post-16 phases and no commitment to increase the Pupil Premium rates.

Overall, the Conservative manifesto falls considerably short of a suite of evidence-based policies that are likely to improve outcomes and narrow the disadvantage gap.

Labour

Labour's plans to reform accountability could be one of the most transformative commitments in its manifesto as it reflects a wealth of evidence that the current system is flawed and leading to unintended consequences. Pledges to recruit 6,500 new teachers are welcome, but there is little detail on where these teachers will come from and how they will be incentivised to join and stay in the profession.

The co-location of over 3,000 new nurseries in school sites could also be a powerful lever in improving accessibility and quality of early years provision, particularly for disadvantaged children, but this policy needs to be properly funded, implemented and evaluated in order to have maximum impact. Labour's commitment to adopt a child poverty strategy is also welcome and reflects EPI's long-standing recommendation. Funded breakfast clubs in primary schools and Young Futures Hubs are likely to be helpful strands in such a strategy.

The glaring omission in the Labour party manifesto is a commitment to protect school funding. Similarly, there is no commitment to uprate the Pupil Premium or to better target funding in the early years and post-16 phases.

Overall, the Labour party has pledged to tackle more of the key challenges in a seemingly evidence-based way. But the manifesto is thin on detail and much of the funding relies on a transfer of subsidy from the private to state sector, which inevitably entails some risk.

Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrat manifesto contains the largest number of education commitments, many of which are well-aligned with the evidence. Proposals to increase the Early Years Pupil Premium, extend the Pupil Premium to 16-19 year-olds and to target early years entitlements to disadvantaged children are all welcome interventions that reflect EPI recommendations. The Liberal Democrats also make important pledges to increase mental health support for young people and to introduce a register of children not in school.

However, while the manifesto does include many seemingly evidence-based commitments, it is unclear whether these are deliverable, particularly within a single Parliament, given the lack of detail.

Greens

The Green Party has proposed some of the most significant changes to the education system. This includes a substantial pledge to increase school spending, with £8bn added to school budgets and a further £2.5bn in capital expenditure to improve the school estate. In higher education, they propose scrapping university tuition fees, this would come at a cost of over £10bn and mean a system where funding was less targeted at those that need it most.

They also propose the ending of "high stakes" tests in primary and secondary schools – which would mean the end of comparable school performance tables – and also the abolition of Ofsted. This runs against evidence of the role of public accountability in raising standards. So, this could lead to a fall in standards overall and a widening of the disadvantage gap.

Overall, the proposals in the Green Party manifesto are the most radical, but the costs involved are very significant, and some features run counter to research evidence.

Reform

The education related commitments from Reform are somewhat limited in nature. Their proposals to restrict children's use of smartphones and social media reflect the relationship seen with issues with young people's mental health. Substantial changes to student finance to extend the repayment period for student loans and eliminate interest would be both regressive and come at a greater cost to the exchequer.

Overall, the Reform manifesto does not address the challenges in the education system today in any substantial way.

What is being proposed in each policy area and how does this stack up against our challenges and the research evidence?

The early years

Across all manifestos, there is a concerning lack of engagement with some of the key issues relating to early childhood education and care.

While the Conservative Party has continued with its pledge to extend funded childcare entitlements to 30 hours per week, it has not provided any detail on how it will ensure providers will be able to deliver the capacity for this extension, nor how it will improve accessibility for disadvantaged families. The Labour Party has also committed to this level of entitlement, as well as identifying the challenges of capacity and availability but, beyond its key proposal of opening 3,000 nurseries in schools, has offered little detail on how to address them.

The Green Party has committed to extending funded childcare entitlements to 35 hours per week, but has not directly addressed issues of capacity and availability. Similarly, the Liberal Democrats' proposed review of rates paid to providers is an acknowledgement of the tension between funded entitlements and financial pressures on providers but does not represent clear policy at this stage.

No party has made commitments relating to addressing the levels of funding for SEND pupils. However, the Liberal Democrat proposal to increase the early years pupil premium, reflecting our

recommendation to weight additional funding towards disadvantaged pupils, is a positive step towards creating a more equitable early years funding system.

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have adopted approaches in line with our call for an early years strategy, but there has been little reflection from the parties on the issues of recruitment and retention. Despite this absence of detail however, both parties have acknowledged the need for a high-quality workforce and have made this central to the future development of their early years career strategies.

The Conservative Party has pledged to continue rolling out Family Hubs across England, in line with our earlier recommendation, but the party has not been clear on how it will ensure these additional hubs receive sufficient funding to realise the benefits that such services can provide to children and families.

The Green Party has committed to a more ambitious plan, in line with our recommendation to strengthen the Family Hub model to a level of service and investment as seen during the Sure Start programme, pledging £1.4bn a year for local authorities to invest in Sure Start centres. No other parties have addressed integrated family services in any detail.

Significant issues in the sector have been scarcely discussed and, in some cases, neglected entirely. This is particularly disappointing given the protective effect high-quality early years education can provide to disadvantaged children, and the real opportunity to address the inequalities we see in later education by sustained and targeted investment in the early years.

School organisation and outcomes

There are many components of party proposals that align with the approaches we identified to tackle some of the key challenges in our education system though no party alone appears to be addressing them all.

Reforming the accountability system, and in particular Ofsted, is a key component of both the Labour and the Liberal Democrat manifestos. The move away from single word judgements to report card style approaches is consistent with EPI recommendations for the government to introduce new performance measures that mitigate some of the perverse incentives in the current system. Similarly, Labour's proposal to bring multi-academy trusts into the remit of inspection reflects the structure of the school system in 2024 and the role that trusts play in school finance, curriculum, and workforce.

There has also been a welcome focus on supporting children and young people with their mental health, with both Labour and the Liberal Democrats pledging to introduce a mental health professional into every school. What is less clear is the exact form that this will take, and how it interacts with mental health support team provision currently being rolled out. There are also very welcome commitments from the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats for various forms of a register of pupils not being educated in schools. This was a key recommendation from our first report.

Curriculum reform did not feature as part of our immediate priorities for an incoming government. Firstly, because we considered that there were already more pressing concerns, and secondly that there had been a number of changes in recent years that schools had only just adapted to. However, we recognise that by the end of the next parliament it would have been fifteen years since the last review and therefore the proposals from both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats are understandable. Beyond the Liberal Democrats Tuition Guarantee, the manifestos offered little that was particularly targeted at tackling the disadvantage gap but reforms to the curriculum may be one way in which we see a move to a system that works better for all pupils. Furthermore, the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats all make pledges to varying degrees to improve access to extra-curricular activities such as sports and music – opportunities that young people from low-income backgrounds are currently less likely to take up.

Unlike previous elections, there appears to be little appetite from the main parties for fast paced structural reform in terms of rapid expansion of the academies programme or a return to local authority-maintained schools, this is welcome and supported by evidence that structural reform has little or no effect on pupil outcomes.

The Conservatives maintain a desire for schools to be in 'strong' academy trusts though set no timescale by which this should be achieved. As we set out previously, it is important that the sector continues to build its understanding of what effective school groups do. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats appear to have no plans to row back the academised system but do commit to a stronger role for local authorities in admissions, place planning, and special educational needs. This is something we called for in our first report and will be particularly important during a period of falling pupil rolls. The Green Party is alone in wanting to move academies back under local authority control.

Of pressing concern is the lack of urgency and detail about how the parties would support pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. While there are some commitments across Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and the Conservative party including the establishment of a SEND body, greater support and expertise in mainstream schools, and new specialist provision, no single party addresses the challenges of the SEND system holistically, and all would require significantly more detail.

Post-16 and higher education

There has been a significant focus on increasing participation in technical and vocational education, falling apprenticeship starts, and employer investment in training. Policies on skills have emphasised the importance of lifelong learning and harnessing higher level technical education in order to up- and re-skill the economy.

There has been little attention paid by parties to the disadvantage gap amongst 16-19 year olds, with the exception of the Liberal Democrats who have proposed a Young People's premium. This reflects one of EPI's key recommendations.

The Conservative's plans to implement the Advanced British Standard (ABS) is a welcome strategy in broadening the 16-19 curriculum and increasing the offering of maths and English until age 18.

Given the demonstrated benefits of a wider curriculum, this policy will benefit disadvantaged students who are more likely to narrow their choices after GCSEs. Extending maths and English will align the UK with other leading global economies and address the falling literacy and numeracy rates amongst 18-year-olds. To guarantee the success of the ABS, there will need to be significant changes to the workforce and more detail on whether students will have flexibility to study at different levels.

The Liberal Democrats have also offered a review of the post-16 qualifications. Labour has offered to conduct a curriculum review but did not specifically address the narrowing of post-16 choices nor how to improve basic skills amongst young people. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have proposed strengthening careers advice to address the increasing NEET rates amongst 16–24-year-olds. The Conservatives have not offered new plans on careers advice.

Parties have offered various plans to reform apprenticeships. The Conservatives have proposed to increasing apprenticeship starts and to fund this by cutting higher education courses, while Labour and the Liberal Democrats have proposed increasing the flexibility of the apprenticeship levy so it can be used more widely for skills and training. Increasing flexibility however is unlikely to reverse the trend of falling starts.

Labour and the Conservatives have committed relatively little to addressing issues in higher education. The Conservatives plan to reduce the provision of higher education by cutting poorly performing courses.

With respect to tuition fees, the Conservatives plan to continue the 2022-23 student finance regime, despite the increased burden on lower- and middle-income graduates, while Labour has committed to making the system more progressive it has not offered any further details as to how this would be achieved.

Neither party has addressed the instability of higher education budgets nor the overreliance on international students as a funding source. The Liberal Democrats have proposed removing international students from long-term migration numbers. While the Green Party have proposed abolishing student fees and reintroducing maintenance grants, the substantial price tag of the policies means that it is unlikely to be a priority for the next government with other areas of the economy requiring significant investment.

Beyond potential changes to student finance, neither Labour nor the Conservatives have offered detailed plans on widening participation despite the fact that the gap in progression rate to higher education has widened to the highest recorded level.[4] While the Green Party would reintroduce maintenance grants and the Liberal Democrats will work to widen participation, partly through greater transparency in selection criteria, the lack of plans from Labour and the Conservatives to support disadvantaged students amidst a cost-of-living crisis is a notable omission. Additionally,

[4] Department for Education, 'Widening participation in higher education', (July 2023)

little had been said about contextual admissions despite evidence that they widen participation without adversely affecting attainment or dropout.[5]

Parties have increasingly focused on technical and vocational education in efforts to up- and re-skill the economy. The Conservatives and Labour have indicated that they will continue with the Lifelong Learning Entitlement if elected, while the Liberal Democrats have said they would provide every adult with £5,000 for lifelong education and training. Labour would also establish Skills England and introduce a set of coordinated policies that will support local skills development. Assuming successful implementation, these policies are likely to increase take up of higher technical qualifications. Comparatively little has been said on increasing the take up of level 2 and level 3 qualifications amongst adults.

School and college funding

The wider situation of government finances, and a position from the main parties not to increase some of the main tax rates has resulted in an offering that is exceedingly limited and does not address the challenges that schools and colleges are facing. While the education budget has been protected in recent years, relative to other areas of government expenditure, per pupil funding for schools is still 4 per cent lower than it was in 2010 if we account for the inflationary pressures in schools. The situation in further education colleges has been significantly worse.

Both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have commitments that are based on per pupil funding to schools (to protect in the case of the Conservatives and to increase above inflation for the Liberal Democrats). Given the expected fall in pupil rolls over the course of the next parliament, these commitments are at best modest. Simply holding total school funding flat in real terms would deliver a pledge to increase per pupil funding, and cutting it by over £3bn could still deliver a promise to protect per pupil funding. Labour has made no commitment at all on school funding, either per pupil or overall, beyond specific policy linked commitments such teacher training and development and teacher recruitment. In all cases it makes the overall funding package for schools very unclear.

The commitments to funding for sixth forms and further education colleges (as opposed to specific policy interventions in the phase) are even more limited, with no commitment from the Conservative Party or Labour. The Liberal Democrats pledge to increase per student funding in real terms, but there is nothing to suggest that this will be of the scale needed to reverse long-term cuts. However, the Liberal Democrat proposal to introduce a post-16 student premium is very welcome and consistent with what we said was needed to help address both participating and attainment gaps in this phase.

Beyond this pledge none of the parties have made specific commitments to changes to how revenue funding is allocated, or to the value of the pupil premium. If, as expected, the funding settlement for schools and colleges remains tight, then any government should seriously consider

[5] Vikki Boliver, Claire Crawford, Mandy Powell, and Will Craige, 'Admissions in Context', (Sutton Trust, October 2017)

how revenue funding is better targeted to ensure it reaches the pupils and students that need it most. These are difficult trade-offs but necessary in the current spending climate.

Within this context, there are clear arguments that funding breakfast clubs and the expansion of free school meals to those just above existing eligibility thresholds is likely to lead to improvements in attendance and wellbeing. However, further expansion of free school meals to other pupils, at a time of limited funding, would be misguided and could be better targeted at where it is needed most.

Commitments to capital expenditure to address the condition of the school and college estate are also limited. The Department for Education has consistently spent less than it had deemed was necessary to address the most urgent of building repairs. Only the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party have made any commitment to address this need, though these would still appear to fall short of the levels that are really required.

The final, but most pressing concern, is that of high needs funding, for pupils with acute special educational needs. Commitments from the main parties are again limited, or do not set out what they will achieve and how they will do it. Whoever forms the next government must review funding for special educational need including how funding is allocated. The high needs budget should be grounded in the level of need across the population and the true cost of provision to address those needs. The current system does neither and therefore creates substantial financial instability. In addition, the government must take action to increase capacity within state-funded special schools and address the high cost associated with private provision to reduce the cost of providing places. Schools, local authorities, and some of our most vulnerable children are at risk if the current situation is not addressed.

Education workforce

Despite issues of teacher pay, recruitment, and teacher-pupil ratios all appearing in headlines over the past two years, this election has not seen the scale of these challenges meaningfully addressed in party manifestos.

The most notable omission across the manifestos are significant commitments on teacher pay. No party has pledged to improve pay rates for teachers or support staff and address the real terms pay cut that the profession has seen over the last decade, particularly for senior staff and further education teachers. Stronger commitments on pay are required to ensure teaching remains competitive in both schools and colleges.

With teacher recruitment consistently lagging behind government targets, it is also disappointing to see little detail on how new staff will be recruited into the profession. The Labour manifesto is the only manifesto to contain a concrete figure on teacher recruitment, although party's target of 6,500 remains well short of both the recent targets and the number of staff required to ensure all pupils are taught by qualified teachers, let alone specialist subject teachers. The Conservative Party, while not committing to a figure, has pledged to attract more teachers by offering £30,000 in tax-free bonuses over a five year period for new teachers in key subjects. This is a welcome commitment, as these incentives are likely to bring about short-term gains in early career teacher

recruitment and make teaching a more attractive profession for younger workers and new entrants. However, it does not address the range of issues around longer-term retention beyond the five-year bonus period, nor the retention of older, more experienced staff currently in the profession.

Another issue of key importance to the health and sustainability of the workforce is addressing teacher wellbeing. Teachers frequently cite workload and working conditions as major concerns, but no party has made clear commitments on how these issues will be alleviated for staff. No party has touched upon bolstering mental health support for school staff. A package of policies to ease the working lives of teachers in this way would not only make the profession more attractive to new entrants and graduates but assist with retention in the longer term.

On a positive note, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have identified the requirement for high-quality continuing professional development to increase the quality of the workforce and the level of qualification of teachers, both of which have knock-on effects on pupil outcomes. Labour's offering of £270m for CPD for teachers and headteachers through a Teacher Training Entitlement is a good step towards creating more meaningful improvements in teacher quality. The additional focus on headteachers is particularly notable, as recent EPI research has found that effective headteachers can reduce teacher turnover and staff absenteeism in secondary schools, as well as providing benefits up to three months of learning for pupils under effective leadership.[6]

The Liberal Democrats, while less clear on their commitment, have also recognised the value of high-quality CPD and pledged to introduce a funded CPD programme, including training on parental engagement. While these CPD policies are ultimately positive, more ambitious strategies from the parties could have further benefits, namely the addressing the shortage of 'specialist' staff. Well-funded, high-quality CPD can effectively retrain and upskill staff to fill shortages as a complement to graduate recruitment.

[6] James Zuccollo, Joana Cardi Dias, Eva Jiménez, and Nils Braakmann, 'The influence of headteachers on their schools', (Education Policy Institute, October 2023)

Early years

Early years

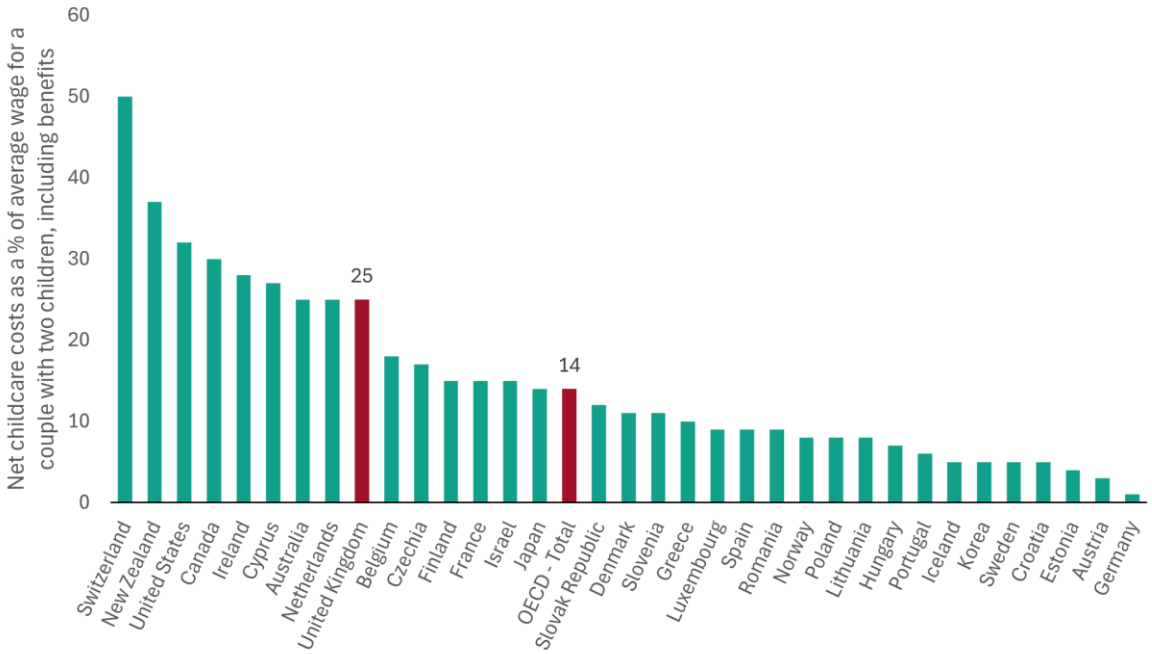
The current landscape

High quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has the potential to improve children's educational and wider outcomes in the short and longer-term,[7] including educational attainment, wellbeing, and socio-emotional skills[8] and help close the disadvantage gap – around 40 per cent of which is already evident by age 5.

The funding system for the early years is both complex and insufficient and offers little support to families with the youngest children. The 2023 Spring Budget announced an extension of 30 hours of funded childcare, for 38 weeks of the year, to working parents of children aged 9 months to 2 years, but this will not address the issue of lack of accessibility of ECEC for the poorest children whose parents are not in work and may even reduce accessibility if disadvantaged children are crowded-out or providers are forced out of business.

Childcare can be a significant proportion of family budgets, particularly for those with the youngest children. For a couple with two children aged 2 and 3, net costs represent 25 per cent of their average wage, almost double that of the OECD average, as seen in Figure 1.1.[9]

Figure 1.1: The cost of childcare in the UK compared with other OECD countries



[7] Elizabeth Cascio, 'The promises and pitfalls of universal early education', IZA World of Labor (January 2015)
[8] Edward Melhuish and Julian Gardiner, 'Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age seven years', (November 2021); Patricia Eadie, Jane Page, Penny Levickis, Catriona Elek, Lisa Murray, Lucas Wang and Catherine Lloyd-Johnsen. 'Domains of quality in early childhood education and care: A scoping review of the extent and consistency of the literature', Educational Review (June 2022)
[9] OECD, 'OECD.Stat: Benefits, Taxes and Wages – Net childcare costs for parents using childcare facilities', (2022)

Ultimately, these **funding pressures risk squeezing out disadvantaged children from ECEC** and **potentially disincentivising work for middle-income families.** There has been a sizeable shift in early years spending away from the tax and welfare system towards the funded entitlement. This growth in funded hours has been popular with some parents but has put pressure on providers, while disproportionately benefiting those higher up the income distribution.[10] Whilst early education has the potential to benefit those from disadvantaged backgrounds the most, existing use is highest amongst better off families.[11,12] Funding pressures on providers have knock-on implications for access, with low-income children and those with additional needs most at risk of being crowded-out. Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are markedly underserved, with many failing to be provided with a place.[13] Only 18 per cent of local authorities in England have sufficient pre-school provision for disabled children.[14]

The early years workforce faces issues with recruitment and retention. While research suggests early years education needs to be of high quality to have a strong impact on longer-term outcomes, challenges with recruitment and retention of staff risk this quality being compromised, particularly in more disadvantaged areas. Just 8.6 per cent of the early years workforce have accredited graduate status (early years teacher status or qualified teacher status), despite evidence that direct contact with graduate staff has a positive impact on young children's outcomes.[15] Meanwhile, expansions of early years entitlements have placed further demand on an already over-extended workforce, with estimates that around 27,500 further early years professionals will need to be recruited by 2028 to meet demand. This represents an 8 per cent expansion of the workforce in a sector that has lost 3 per cent of the total workforce since 2019, with over 70 per cent of local authorities reporting that ECEC settings are finding it 'very difficult' to recruit qualified and experienced staff.[16]

These challenges seem to be more acute in private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings than in school-based settings, with reasons for high turnover including low pay, unfavourable working conditions and unrealistic staff expectations of the role.[17] High turnover is undesirable because it impacts stability and quality of relationships between educators/carers and children, and adds to pressures within settings (for example, because new staff have to recruited and trained).

The 2023 Spring Budget recognised the problem of declining childminder numbers, announcing financial incentives aimed at reversing this trend, though the extent to which these incentives are sufficient to improve recruitment to the sector has been questioned, and they do little to address retention. While higher pay is likely to help improve workforce sustainability, it will not address

[10] Christine Farquharson, Robert Joyce and Tom Waters, 'Early years and childcare in England: Public spending, private costs, and the challenges ahead', (March 2023)
[11] Family and Childcare Trust, 'Tackling barriers to access in early education', (December 2023)
[12] Department for Education, 'Written evidence submitted by the Department for Education CEY1714 (to the Education Committee inquiry on Support for Childcare and the Early Years)', (March 2023)
[13] Kitty Stewart and Mary Reader, 'The Conservatives' record on early childhood: policies, spending and outcomes from May 2015 to pre-COVID 2020', (December 2020); Children's Commissioner, 'Vision for childcare', (October 2022)
[14] Megan Jarvie, Lisa Kunwar Deer, Sam Shorto and Emma Goddard, 'Childcare Survey 2023' (March 2023)
[15] Sara Bonetti and Jo Blanden, 'Early years workforce qualifications and children's outcomes', (December 2020)
[16] Jones et al., 'How many early years professionals do we need? Estimating the requirement by 2028', (September 2023)
[17] Department for Education, 'The early years workforce: recruitment, retention, and business planning', (April 2022)

challenges around continuing professional development and career progression. And despite the vital importance of early educators in mitigating the disadvantage gap that emerges even before children start school, many do not have the same status as other workforces, including teachers.[18]

Amidst all these challenges, **the benefits of ECEC are not being realised**. In England, the roll-out of the original 15-hour universal entitlement led to only small improvements in recorded development at age 5, with no apparent benefits by age 11.[19] It has also had a relatively small impact on parents' working decisions, unlike the point at which children start school which does significantly increase labour force participation.[20] This limited impact on either child development or parental employment might seem disappointing, but evidence suggests early and sustained targeted funding yields larger positive effects on educational and later-life outcomes, strengthening the case for a more comprehensive package of targeted funding at the early years.[21]

Given that the current roll-out to 30 hours and roll-down to 9 months is also predicated to serve largely as a subsidy for those who would already have used childcare to support work, this situation seems likely to continue.[22] At a time when child poverty remains high and families are struggling with the cost of living, this direct support for families may still be a worthwhile policy objective in its own right. However, it does not directly address the unmet need of children with SEND, nor the 'childcare deserts' experienced in some areas, nor the tendency of families in more deprived areas and with lower incomes to be less likely to be aware of and to access their entitlements. Crucially, it does not concentrate on ensuring quality provision focused on children's experiences and development.

Without a clear strategy for the early years, there is a lack of clarity as to the purpose of early education and care, the relative priorities of different policies stretching across children and parents and any trade-offs between them.

What should a new government do?

- **Simplify early years funding** so it is easier for parents and carers to navigate, lessening bureaucratic barriers and the administrative burden for families. An incoming government should work towards providing a single point of access for parents and carers to be able to ascertain all their entitlements to funding for early education and care. Development of this policy should be based on user-journey informed research to ensure accessibility for all parents and carers, particularly those with lower participation such as disadvantaged families.

[18] Jo Hutchinson, John Dunford and Mike Treadaway, 'Divergent pathways: the disadvantage gap, accountability and the pupil premium', (July 2016)
[19] Jo Blanden, Emilia Del Bono, Sandra McNally and Birgitta Rabe, 'Universal Pre-school Education: The Case of Public Funding with Private Provision', The Economic Journal, Volume 126, Issue 592, (May 2016)
[20] Mike Brewer, Sarah Cattan, Claire Crawford and Birgitta Rabe, 'Does more free childcare help parents work more?', Labour Economics, Volume 74, (January 2022)
[21] Jackson, C. K., & Mackevicius, C. "The Distribution of School Spending Impacts." NBER Working Paper No. 28517. National Bureau of Economic Research. (February 2021)
[22] Christine Farquharson, 'What you need to know about the new childcare entitlements', Institute for Fiscal Studies, (March 2024)

- **Weight early years funding much more heavily towards children from low-income families and children with SEND** by increasing the early years pupil premium to be commensurate with the pupil premium in later school years, increasing the disability access fund (DAF) to reflect the costs of quality education and care for children with disabilities, and simplifying access to the DAF. Entitlement to the DAF should not be restricted (as it is presently) to only children in receipt of disability living allowance (DLA), as not all children with disabilities in the early years are in receipt of DLA.[23,24]
- **The Family Hub model should be strengthened** or returned to the original Sure Start model to ensure a family-focussed and integrated system of care, education and wider holistic support for young children and their parents/carers. Recent research has suggested the original Sure Start model produced positive effects on educational outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children, for modest returns on cost.[25] Research also indicated improved health outcomes for children as a result of Sure Start, and that inequality in early education and care attendance was reduced in areas with more Sure Start provision.[26,27] Roll-out should be rigorously evaluated to ensure government continues to learn about what does and does not work, with an eye both to immediate and longer-term learnings, and to accumulating lessons on past good practice and long-term impacts, which continue to emerge.[28]
- A new government should **publish an early years strategy** which should set out plans to: improve accessibility for disadvantaged children in particular; create a sustainable model for providers while also affordable for families; and provide a clear strategy for ensuring a high-quality workforce.

What are the parties proposing?

Funding for the early years

The Conservative Party has maintained its commitment announced in the 2023 Spring Budget to extend the current eligibility of funded childcare from 15 hours to 30 hours per week for working parents with children between 9 months and two years old. The Green Party has committed to a further extension up to 35 hours per week. While these extensions are welcome news to many parents, they provide no benefit to many of the poorest children whose parents are less likely to be in work. Additionally, without plans to increase the capacity of providers and the recruitment and retention of the early years workforce, the policy risks 'crowding out' disadvantaged families and placing further financial pressures on providers.

[23] Department for Education, 'Sources of income for early years providers', (September 2018)
[24] Contact, 'It's time to bust some myths about DLA!', (February 2023)
[25] Carneiro, Cattan, and Ridpath, 'The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes', Institute for Fiscal Studies, (April 2024)
[26] Sarah Cattan Gabriella Conti Christine Farquharson Rita Ginja Maud Pecher, 'The health impacts of Sure Start', (Institute for Fiscal Studies, August 2021)
[27] Tammy Campbell, Ludovica Gambaro, and Kitty Stewart, ''Universal' early education: Who benefits? Patterns in take-up of the entitlement to free early education among three-year-olds in England', *British Educational Research Journal*, (June 2018)
[28] The Health Foundation, 'Sure Start: a model for long-term policymaking? - with Naomi Eisenstadt and Donna Molloy', (May 2024)

The Liberal Democrats have pledged to increase the early years pupil premium to almost triple its current level, raising it from £353 to £1,000 per year. This increase would cost approximately an additional £74.3m beyond existing spend on the early years pupil premium, based on the current number of eligible children. However, the early years pupil premium is likely underclaimed in comparison to the pupil premium in primary and secondary schools, making this figure a possible underestimate. Any expansion should also come with a focus on increasing enrolment, either through auto-enrolment at the family level or directly funding settings based on the number of eligible pupils. Alongside this funding increase, disadvantaged children aged three and four will also be entitled an additional five free hours of childcare a week under Liberal Democrat plans. Taken together, this would benefit the most disadvantaged families in accessing early years education and more effectively weight early years funding towards children in poverty.

This change would assist with progress to close the early years disadvantage gap by increasing funding for disadvantaged children in the early years to a level more comparable with the pupil premium in primary and secondary schools. However, without also increasing the capacity of providers and the recruitment and retention of the workforce, these additional entitlements may struggle to be realised in practice. The Liberal Democrats also state their ambition, when the public finances allow, to extend the additional five free hours of childcare to disadvantaged two-year-olds as a step towards universal entitlements for all two- to four-year-olds.

The Liberal Democrats have also committed to launch a review into the rates paid to providers of funded childcare hours to ensure costs are fully covered by entitlement payments. This kind of review could have a positive impact by identifying disparities in access and provision across the country and addressing the sustainability of the entitlement model, but without a focus on the barriers facing disadvantaged families it may not provide clear insight into how the model can be improved to help close the early years disadvantage gap. The Party has also committed to introducing a 'toddler top-up', an enhanced rate of child benefit for one-year-olds, but has not provided any further detail on how much this rate will be enhanced.

Early years workforce

The Labour Party has committed to honouring the current government policy to expand the funded childcare entitlement from 15 to 30 hours per week but acknowledge that doing so will require greater workforce capacity. They propose to work with the sector to ensure professionals are provided with opportunities for high-quality training and recognised for their work, but there is currently limited detail of how this would be achieved.

The Liberal Democrats have proposed to simplify the registration process for childminders to remove barriers to joining the profession. The current registration requirements mean most childminders and out-of-school provisions are required to register on both the Early Years Register (EYR) and Compulsory Childcare Register (CCR), while other specific providers may choose to register on the Voluntary Childcare Register (VCR). The party has pledged to replace this fragmented landscape with a single childcare register, alongside commissioning a practitioner-led review into simplifying administrative burdens on providers and attracting new, high-quality childminders. This acknowledgement of childminding as a complement to PVI-sector and school-

based provision is welcome, but there is little evidence to suggest how effective reducing registration requirements would be in attracting additional childminders. While the proposed review may not immediately address issues with workforce supply and retention, it can contribute to the evidence base of how childcare professionals can be attracted and supported to work.

The Liberal Democrats have also committed to developing a career strategy for early years staff, including a training programme with the majority of those working with children aged two to four to have a relevant early years qualification or be working towards one. The acknowledgement of the need for a qualified workforce is positive given evidence on the link between direct contact with graduate staff and positive outcomes for young children,[29] but no further detail is provided on how this strategy will be developed in practice.

The Liberal Democrats have also pledged to include a specific emphasis on identifying and supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities in training for early years staff. The importance of early identification of SEND in children has long been recognised, as noted in the SEND Code of Practice;[30] and delaying identification at the early years can compound challenges for children through escalation of unmet needs. On the other hand, misidentification of SEND also presents similar risks, with the added consequence of putting further strain of the level of provision available to children requiring additional support. While a greater focus on early SEND identification is welcome, we begin from a low baseline in terms of staff qualifications, and already struggling with recruitment and retention, so this is a large undertaking especially given the mixed market of providers. Without a clear strategy to bolster the workforce and address the issues leading many to leave the profession, this policy may not be achievable.

Quality of provision

The Conservative Party has said it plans to expand its Family Hub programme to deliver a hub in every local authority, aimed at providing a 'one-stop shop' of joined-up family support including health services, parenting support, and childcare. The continued roll-out of the Family Hub model was a recommendation we put forward in our first report.

Since the announcement of the policy in the 2021 Spring Budget, 75 of the 152 local authorities in England have seen a Family Hub set up, albeit in some cases these hubs are not physical locations. Research has shown that integrating family services in deprived areas in this way can make a material difference to children's outcomes, but the impact of those services is highly dependent on receiving adequate funding.[31]

Currently the Family Hub system receives just £100m a year compared with the £300m a year in the first year, the Sure Start programme, which had positive effects on educational outcomes,

[29] Sara Bonetti and Jo Blanden, 'Early years workforce qualifications and children's outcomes', (December 2020)
[30] Department for Education and Department of Health, 'Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years', (January 2015)
[31] Pedro Carneiro, Sarah Cattan, and Nick Ridpath, 'The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes', (Institute for Fiscal, April 2024)

particularly for disadvantaged children.[32] Furthermore, Family Hubs have a much wider age remit than Sure Start, which focused on children under five. While the expansion of Family Hubs is a positive step towards providing integrated family support services across the whole of England, the model must be funded with further investment to fully realise the potential improvements to educational outcomes that these services can provide, with this investment targeted first in the most disadvantaged areas. Additionally, the size of some local authorities combined with poor public transport, especially in rural areas, means even if a Family Hub is established in every local authority, many families may still have difficulties in accessing services. The Conservative Party has made no pledges on what the level of investment in Family Hubs will be under their proposed expansion, or on further plans to improve the accessibility of the model.

The Green Party has proposed to invest £1.4bn per year for local authorities to spend on Sure Start centres. This mirrors our recommendation to strengthen integrated parent services (through strengthening the Family Hub model or restoring the Sure Start system). The level of investment proposed by the party would be over half of the spending on Sure Start at its peak (£2.5bn per year) and would likely be sufficient to realise similar positive effects on outcomes.[32] However, the Green Party has provided no further detail on the practicalities of this policy, such as how the transition back to Sure Start from existing Family Hubs would be implemented, or if any changes from the original Sure Start model would be implemented given the materially different ECEC landscape in 2024.

The Labour Party has pledged to create over 3,000 new school-based nursery classrooms based in primary schools, aiming to utilise spare capacity in primary schools due to falling pupil numbers. The party claims this will create 100,000 new childcare places, funded by its policy to levy VAT on independent schools. This policy is a positive move towards tackling the shortage of affordable high-quality ECEC, in areas currently underserved by provision, while having the additional benefit of capitalising on the opportunity presented by the decline in primary school pupils. However, it is not clear how the party will ensure these new provisions are staffed by high-quality early years professionals given the declining size of the early years workforce. Labour has made no specific commitments on building the capacity of the early years workforce.

Other policies

In the 2024 Spring Budget, the Conservative Party announced changes to the high-income child benefit charge, a tapered tax on child benefit claimed if a parent earns over a certain income. Previously, this income threshold was set at £50,000, tapering up to a 100 per cent charge on child benefit claimed for incomes over £60,000. As of April 2024, the threshold was raised to £60,000, tapering up to the 100 per cent charge over £80,000, and the rate at which the charge was applied was halved. While this change was a positive step towards making the ECEC fairer and more accessible to medium- and high-income families, it provided no support to the most disadvantaged families and remains unnecessarily favourable towards families with more evenly

[32] Pedro Carneiro, Sarah Cattan, and Nick Ridpath, 'The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes', (Institute for Fiscal, April 2024)

split incomes rather than single-earner households. The Conservatives have said they would move to a household based system so that families do not lose child benefit until their combined income reaches £120,000.

The Labour Party has committed to a pilot expansion of a 'children's number' – a digital identification number that links a child's record across education, the health service, social care and wider services to reduce barriers that families face when accessing services and prevent children from 'falling through the gaps'. This is a welcome step towards a centralised data service that allows for the better monitoring and oversight of 'managed moves' between schools, moves into home schooling, and the phenomenon of 'unexplained exits', where children become unaccounted for in the education system. It may also help make more visible the experiences of 'hidden' children, including those in care and insecure living situations, and enable better child protection. However, is it not yet clear which individuals and institutions would be responsible for the data and provided access to it, and for what purposes.

The Liberal Democrats have committed to a range of reforms to parental leave entitlements with the aim of assisting working parents in managing the crucial early stages of their child's development. This includes making all parental pay and leave day-one rights (currently workers are entitled to 18 weeks of parental leave after a year at their workplace), extending this right to self-employed workers, doubling the Statutory Maternity and Shared Parental Pay entitlements to £350 per week, and introducing an additional 'use-it-or-lose-it' month of parental leave for fathers and partners, paid at 90 per cent of earnings. The Liberal Democrats state their ambition - when the public finances allow - is to give all families six weeks of 'use-it-or-lose-it' leave paid at 90 per cent of earnings, and 46 weeks of parental leave to share between partners as they wish, paid at double the current statutory rate. Extending parental leave to six weeks has been recommended by the Chartered Institute of Professional Development[33] and is linked with smaller gender wage gaps and smaller labour force participation gaps.[34] The party has also pledged to require large employers to publish their parental leave and pay policies.

The Labour Party has also said it will review the parental leave system so that it better supports working families, but provide no further detail on what this review will entail.

The Liberal Democrats have also pledged to review and reform the Child Maintenance Service, an entitlement paid to cover a child's living costs when one of the parents does not live with the child. This is an important piece of a future strategy to tackle child poverty across England, and the findings of such a review should be seriously considered by any incoming government.

The Liberal Democrats have also pledged to elevate the Minister for Children to being a cabinet position. This represents a signalling of the importance of children and families in cross-government policymaking and would be a welcome machinery of government change.

[33] CIPD, 'Employer Focus on Working Parents', (August 2022)
[34] Rosie Fogden, Tanya Singh, Taisiya Merkulova, Joeli Brearley, Lauren Fabianski and Ben Franklin, 'Leave in the lurch: Paternity leave, gender equality and the UK economy', (Centre for Progressive Policy, June 2023)

The Liberal Democrats have also committed to providing free access to sign language lessons for the parents and guardians of deaf children. Deaf children were on average 8.8 months of learning behind their classmates who did not have any special needs, by age seven in 2019.[35] This policy does represent a major step forward in making education more accessible for deaf children, as early access to sign language plays a major role in developing language skills and preventing language deprivation.[36,37]

While this further support is welcome, a future government should look to develop a holistic strategy to meet the full range of needs of deaf children, and the scope of additional funding and services required to tackle the deaf attainment gap, which has remained largely static since 2015.

Overall assessment

Across all manifestos, there is a concerning lack of engagement with some of the key issues relating to early childhood education and care.

While the Conservative Party has continued with its pledge to extend funded childcare entitlements to 30 hours per week, it has not provided any detail on how it will ensure providers will be able to deliver the capacity for this extension, nor how it will improve accessibility for disadvantaged families. The Labour Party has also committed to this level of entitlement, as well as identifying the challenges of capacity and availability but, beyond its key proposal of opening 3,000 nurseries in schools, has offered little detail on how to address them.

The Green Party has committed to extending funded childcare entitlements to 35 hours per week, but has not directly addressed issues of capacity and availability. Similarly, the Liberal Democrats' proposed review of rates paid to providers is an acknowledgement of the tension between funded entitlements and financial pressures on providers but does not represent clear policy at this stage.

No party has made commitments relating to addressing the levels of funding for SEND pupils. However, the Liberal Democrat proposal to increase the early years pupil premium, reflecting our recommendation to weight additional funding towards disadvantaged pupils, is a positive step towards creating a more equitable early years funding system.

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have adopted approaches in line with our call for an early years strategy, but there has been little reflection from the parties on the issues of recruitment and retention. Despite this absence of detail however, both parties have acknowledged the need for a high-quality workforce and have made this central to the future development of their early years career strategies.

The Conservative Party has pledged to continue rolling out Family Hubs across England, in line with our earlier recommendation, but the party has not been clear on how it will ensure these

[35] Jo Hutchinson, 'The educational outcomes of deaf children in England', (Education Policy Institute and NCDS, March 2023)
[36] Kate Rowley and Dani Sive, 'Preventing language deprivation, (BATOD, November 2021)
[37] Annalene Van Staden, Gerhard Badenhorst, and Elaine Ridge. 'The Benefits of Sign Language for Deaf Learners with Language Challenges', *Per Linguam*, (2011)

additional hubs receive sufficient funding to realise the benefits that such services can provide to children and families.

The Green Party has committed to a more ambitious plan, in line with our recommendation to strengthen the Family Hub model to a level of service and investment as seen during the Sure Start programme, pledging £1.4bn a year for local authorities to invest in Sure Start centres. No other parties have addressed integrated family services in any detail.

Significant issues in the sector have been scarcely discussed and, in some cases, neglected entirely. This is particularly disappointing given the protective effect high-quality early years education can provide to disadvantaged children, and the real opportunity to address the inequalities we see in later education by sustained and targeted investment in the early years.

School organisation and outcomes

School organisation and outcomes

The current landscape

Pupils in England perform well across all the major international benchmarking assessments that measure performance in years 5, 9 and 11. In the most recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) for year 5 pupils, England was placed fourth overall, behind only Russia, Hong Kong and Singapore (though comparisons with other countries were complicated by the pandemic which affected the point at which countries took the test.)[38]

But there are **wide disparities in pupil outcomes that worsened over the course of the pandemic**. The difference in outcomes between pupils from low-income backgrounds and their peers is currently equivalent to around 19 months of learning by the time they sit their GCSEs, although progress in closing the gap had already stalled before the pandemic hit.[39] The effects of the pandemic continue to be felt in pupil outcomes. The proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of primary school in 2023 was 60 per cent, still 5 percentage points from the last pre-pandemic assessments in 2019.[40]

There are also **disparities in provision for those with special educational needs and disabilities**, the most significant factor in whether a given child is recorded as having SEND is the primary school they attend.[41] Two thirds of the total variation is accounted for not by any individual facts about a child but by which school they attend. Individual child-level factors that influence SEND identification include deprivation and there is some evidence of the rationing of SEND support to relatively less deprived children living within more deprived areas. Children who are more absent from school or have moved schools are less likely to be identified with SEND than otherwise similar children.

Mental health issues amongst children and young people had been gradually increasing over the two decades leading up to the pandemic.[42] In 2017, around 1 in 8 children aged 8-16 had a probable mental health disorder, this increased to 1 in 5 by 2023.[43] Referrals to NHS mental health services for young people increased by 80 per cent through the pandemic.[44] Amongst young people, gender is the key axis of inequality: around a third of females aged 17 to 19 have a probable conditions, compared with a sixth of males.[42]**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

The pandemic was also associated with a large increase in pupil absence. In the autumn term of 2022/23, the overall absence rate was 7.5 per cent.[45] While this fell to 6.7 per cent the following year, it remained well above the 4.9 per cent in autumn 2019/20. Persistent absence - defined as

[38] Ariel Lindorff, Jamie Stiff, and Heather Kayton, 'PIRLS 2021: National Report for England', (May 2023)
[39] Emily Hunt et al, 'EPI Annual Report 2023', (October 2023)
[40] Department for Education, 'Key stage 2 attainment: academic year 2022/23', (December 2023)
[41] Jo Hutchinson, 'Identifying pupils with special educational needs and disabilities', (March 2021)
[42] NHS Digital, 'Mental health of children and young people in England, 2017', (November 2018)
[43] NHS England, 'Mental health of children and young people in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey', (November 2023)
[44] Hannah Chu-Han Huang and Dennis Ougrin, 'Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child and adolescent mental health services', (September 2021)
[45] Department for Education, 'Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2023/24', (May 2024)

when a pupil misses at least 10 per cent of possible sessions – increased from 13.1 per cent of all pupils to 24.2 per cent before falling to 19.4 per cent over the same period. There is also no consistent data on children who are home educated and government plans to introduce a statutory register have been postponed.

It is now 14 years since the start of the **rapid expansion of the academies programme**. Over half of state-funded schools are academies or free schools with the majority in multi-academy trusts.[46] Though academisation is changing how schools are operating, multiple studies have found either limited or no effects of academisation on pupil attainment at a system level.[47] Academisation is also strongly associated with lower chances of being identified with SEND during primary school, all else being equal.[48]

The next parliament will cover a period of falling rolls in England's schools. The Department for Education estimates that the pupil population will fall by 626,000 by the end of the decade, returning pupil numbers to a similar level to that seen prior to the post-millennium population bulge.[49] The number of primary aged pupils is already in decline and the number of pupils in secondary schools is expected to peak this year. As school funding is largely driven by pupil numbers, a fall in a school's roll is typically associated with a fall in its funding while its costs do not necessarily fall in the same way. Substantial falls in pupil intakes can result in a school no longer being financially viable.

These population effects are not consistent, with one in seven local authorities expecting increases in the primary aged population by 2027/28.[50] Around one fifth of schools in England are currently operating at or over capacity. Pupil place planning remains the responsibility of local authorities, but they have no statutory levers to direct academies to adjust admissions numbers.[51]

The school system in England is underpinned by a system of accountability using Ofsted inspections and the publication of performance data for individual schools. International evidence suggests that school accountability which allows the direct comparison of schools has a positive impact on pupil outcomes, with standardised testing achieving better results than localised or subjective information.[52] But current performance measures and inspection outcomes are closely linked with pupil demographics. Schools with low levels of disadvantage and high prior attainment are more likely to receive positive judgements from Ofsted or have high Progress 8 scores.[53, 54] Accountability also risks creating perverse incentives, including narrowing curriculum

[46] Department for Education, 'Open academies, free schools, studio schools and UTCs', (May 2024)
[47] Jon Andrews and Natalie Perera, 'The Impact of Academies on Educational Outcomes', (July 2017)
[48] Jo Hutchinson, 'Identifying pupils with special educational needs and disabilities', Education Policy Institute, (March 2021)
[49] Department for Education, 'National pupil projections: reporting year 2023', (October 2023)
[50] Department for Education, 'School capacity: academic year 2022/23', (March 2024)
[51] London Councils, 'Managing surplus school places', (January 2023)
[52] Annika B. Bergbauer, Eric Hanushek, Ludger Woessmann, 'Testing with accountability improves student achievement', (September 2018)
[53] Jo Hutchinson, 'School inspection in England: is there room to improve?', (November 2017)
[54] Kate Beynon and Dave Thomson, 'Contextualising Progress 8', (May 2024)

choices,[55] reducing the inclusiveness of admissions practices, and removing pupils from school rolls.[56] The death of headteacher Ruth Perry in January last year also brought into sharp focus the impact that the current inspection system can have on teacher wellbeing and workload.[57]

What should a new government do?

- **Tackle the widening gap in pupil outcomes, particularly amongst those from vulnerable groups**, through a renewed focus on the disadvantage gap; addressing absence in a way that reflects its range of causes, providing greater support to children with additional needs; and reinstating the commitment to a register of home educated pupils.
- **Set clear expectations and resourcing of local authorities including in pupil place planning, SEND provision, and managed moves, giving them powers where necessary.** Recognise that wholesale structural reform is likely to have limited impact on outcomes in and of itself but there is an ongoing need to understand the evidence on what makes an effective school group and how best practice can be spread across the system.
- **Establish and address drivers of mental ill health amongst children and young people.** Continue the focus on providing mental health support through schools and ensuring there is access to provision across the country. Evaluate the impact of mental health support teams and explore a consistent approach to measuring wellbeing across schools. This could be used to identify groups of pupils who need additional support and to measure the impact of interventions but should not be part of the school accountability framework.
- **Reform the current accountability framework including the role of Ofsted and its gradings**, to ensure that it is not delivering perverse incentives such as curriculum narrowing or unnecessary workload and operates in a way that supports school improvement and inclusion across all types of school.

What are the parties proposing?

Accountability

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats would replace single word Ofsted judgements with report cards underpinned by a suite of metrics. The Conservative commitment for Ofsted to provide "clear judgements to parents" is taken to mean that the current grading system would remain.

Attempts have been made in the past to provide a broader picture of school performance. Firstly the 'school profile' was introduced by the Education Act 2005.[58] Subsequently the then Labour government developed and consulted on the introduction of a school report card which would include measures of pupil progress, attainment, wellbeing, attainment gaps, and pupil and parent

[55] National Foundation for Educational Research, 'What impact does accountability have on curriculum, standards and engagement in education? A literature review', (September 2018)
[56] Whitney Crenna-Jennings and Jo Hutchinson, 'Unexplained school transfers and managed moves', (March 2024)
[57] Ofsted, 'Ofsted responds to prevention of future deaths report', (January 2024)
[58] Education Act 2005, Part 4, Maintained Schools, Section 104

perceptions.[59] This was proposed to be introduced from 2011 but was not implemented by the Coalition Government of 2010-2015. EPI has advocated for a broader set of measures in a report card style approach as it should mitigate against some of the perverse incentives that currently exist in the system. EPI has already published measures at school group level, which could serve as a blueprint for any government seeking to broaden performance measures.[60]

Where schools are underperforming, Labour propose regional improvement teams, to work as partners with schools in responding to areas of weakness identified in the new report cards.

Both the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party propose reforming the current central measures of school performance by including additional subjects to broaden the curriculum offer to secondary aged pupils. For the Liberal Democrats this means changing the EBacc measure to include an arts subject. Under the current definition, the EBacc comprises English (literature and language), mathematics, the sciences (combined or triple), a humanities subject, and an ancient or modern foreign language, therefore not incentivising schools to enter pupils in arts subjects. The percentage of pupils entered for all EBacc subjects has been around 40 per cent for several years having initially increased rapidly.[61] The current limiting factor is entries to modern foreign languages, the vast majority of pupils who have entered four of the five EBacc subjects are missing this pillar. Schools that already perform poorly on the language pillar may therefore not be incentivised by the addition of an arts subject.

Labour would instead change Attainment 8 and Progress 8 to include at least one creative or vocational subject. Unlike the EBacc, both Attainment 8 and Progress 8 already allow for the inclusion of a broader range of subjects if schools offer them.[62] The effect of this change would be to penalise schools that do not offer these subjects (and hence encourage them to broaden provision) but it would also reduce the flexibility that schools and pupils have in choosing subjects studied.

The Labour Party would also bring multi-academy trusts into the remit of inspection. Ofsted can currently only inspect individual schools, though they are also able to carry out "summary evaluations" of trusts where they collect evidence about the trust's work through inspecting a sample of their academies with a further site visit to the trust central team.[63] However, this does not result in an inspection grade for the trust as a whole. Moving towards inspections of trusts reflects their increasing importance in the running of schools. Decisions around financial management, workforce deployment, and curriculum choices are now often taken at trust level.[64] No other parties are taking this approach.

[59] Department for Children Schools and Families and Ofsted, 'A school report card: prospectus', (June 2009)
[60] Louis Hodge, Robbie Cruikshanks, Jon Andrews, and Oana Gavriloiu, 'The features of effective school groups', (April 2024)
[61] Department for Education, 'Key Stage 4 performance 2023 (revised)', (February 2024)
[62] The eight components of Attainment 8 and Progress 8 comprise: English, mathematics, three highest scoring other EBacc subjects, and then three further subjects (including remaining EBacc subjects if they are the highest scoring).
[63] Ofsted, 'Summary evaluations of multi-academy trusts', (March 2023)
[64] Louis Hodge, Robbie Cruikshanks, Jon Andrews, and Oana Gavriloiu, 'The Features of Effective School Groups', (April 2024)

The Liberal Democrats propose a new parental engagement strategy which would include requiring schools to provide accessible information to parents on what their children are learning. Schools are already required to report a range of information to parents[65], and increased parental engagement has the potential to increase attainment.[66] However, particular attention needs to be given to children from low-income backgrounds as differential rates of parental engagement would risk further widening existing disadvantage gaps. Parents of children with SEND also face greater barriers to engagement.[67]

As part of their review of the curriculum, the Labour Party would consider assessment methods, though say that they would continue to recognise the role of examinations. The Green party would end formal testing in both primary and secondary schools. The removal of formalised testing would risk introducing biased assessments – by gender, ethnicity, special educational needs, and socio-economic factors.[68] It would also mean the end of primary school performance tables in their current form. International evidence suggests that school accountability which allows for the direct comparisons of schools has a positive impact on pupil outcomes, with standardised testing achieving better results than localised or subjective information.[69] In Wales, the abolition of performance tables led to a reduction in school effectiveness which was particularly marked at the lower end of the performance distribution.[70]

Curriculum and qualifications

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have committed to a review of the curriculum. Labour would aim to achieve a broader curriculum with access to sport and the arts, a focus on oracy and digital skills alongside a core of numeracy and literacy in addition to a focus on early numeracy and language development in primary schools. The Liberal Democrats would initiate a commission to "build a long-term consensus on the curriculum". The Green Party would review assessment targets to give parity to the arts and vocational subjects. They would also promote a greater understanding of the natural world. The Reform Party want to make the curriculum "more patriotic" with regular audits of content in social history to "ensure balance", though it is unclear who would be responsible for such audits.

While commitments remain fairly high level, this is not unreasonable in the case of Labour and the Liberal Democrats as these relate to medium to long-term reviews. Similarly, a review of the curriculum was not one of our own immediate priorities but by the end of the next parliament it will have been fifteen years since the last review. A review of the curriculum and assessment must include how it works for all children and in particular those with special educational needs and

[65] Department for Education and Standards and Testing Agency, 'School reports on pupil performance: guide for headteachers', (March 2014)
[66] Education Endowment Foundation, 'Teaching and learning toolkit – parental engagement', (July 2021)
[67] Parentkind, 'Parent voice report 2022', (December 2022)
[68] Tammy Campbell, 'Stereotyped at Seven? Biases in Teacher Judgement of Pupils' Ability and Attainment', (July 2015)
[69] Annika B. Bergbauer, Eric Hanushek, Ludger Woessmann, 'Testing with accountability improves student achievement', (September 2018)
[70] Simon Burgess et al, 'A natural experiment in school accountability: the impact of school performance information on pupil progress and sorting', (October 2013)

disabilities. It must be informed by evidence, experts, and practitioners and not framed so as to prioritise one approach over another. The Conservative Party would continue with "tried and tested techniques" including phonics and their preferred approach to maths.

The Conservatives identify the benefits of enrichment beyond school through the continuation of music hubs and the Liberal Democrats would also expand extracurricular activities including a new entitlement for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Labour plan to launch a new National Music Education network with information on courses and classes.

Pupils from low-income backgrounds are currently less likely to attend sports club or use sport facilities outside of lesson time, and are similarly less likely to attend clubs and societies for hobbies, arts, or music.[71] Attending such clubs is associated with positive later outcomes in education and employment.

Pupil and student outcomes

The Liberal Democrats have proposed a Tutoring Guarantee for disadvantaged pupils who need further support. One-to-one and small group tuition can be highly effective in supporting learning and targeting support towards disadvantaged pupils in particular may help close attainment gaps.[72] However, there is no detail in the Liberal Democrat manifesto about the form that the guarantee will take in terms of number or type of sessions, which subjects will be available, whether they will be delivered by existing teachers in the school or bought in services, and whether it comes with additional funding or a need to be met from existing school budgets.

The Conservative Party would mandate for two hours of PE every week in primary and secondary schools. Ofsted report that most primary schools are already delivering this and, half of secondary schools offer two hours of PE in both key stage 3 and key stage 4.[73] Though the amount of timetabled time allocated to PE reduces significantly in key stage 4. The Conservative Party would support this through an extension of the PE and sport premium to secondary schools, which is currently funded at a rate of £16,000 per school with an additional payment of £10 per pupil. If the premium was funded on the same basis for secondary schools it would cost £86m. If instead it was funded at a similar per pupil rate (around £82 per eligible pupil) this would cost £260m.[74] The Conservative Party has costed this, and funding school games organisers, at £125m. We assume that the Conservative Party are assuming funding secondary schools on the same basis as in primary schools, with a much lower per pupil allocation.

Pupil absence

Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party are proposing that breakfast clubs should be offered in all primary schools as a mechanism to tackle the effects of the cost of living and improve

[71] David Robinson, 'Access to Extra-Curricular Provision and the Association with Outcomes', (Education Policy Institute, February 2024)
[72] Education Endowment Foundation, 'Teaching and learning toolkit'
[73] Ofsted, 'Levelling the playing field: the physical education subject report', (September 2023)
[74] See Annex for details of this estimate.

attendance. Labour would also aim to bring down the cost of school uniform and equipment by limiting the number of branded items a school can require.

Over two thirds of primary schools currently offer subsidised breakfasts.[75] An evaluation of breakfast club provision in 2019 found positive effects on attendance and behaviour amongst primary aged children, though the effects on attainment were more mixed with no effect for older pupils in the study (year 6).[76] Given the high proportion of schools that are already offering provision of some kind, the effects of universal roll out may be limited.

The Liberal Democrats also say that they will tackle the issue of persistent absence by setting up a register of those not in school and tackling the underlying barriers to attendance. The Conservative Party have also said that they will legislate to create a register of children not in school. The register was part of the Schools Bill which was abandoned by government in 2022 and the draft legislation was not brought before parliament again. The Labour Party has committed to a pilot expansion of a 'children's number'; a digital identification number that links a child's record across education, the health service, social care and wider services to reduce barriers that families face when accessing services and prevent children from 'falling through the gaps'.

SEND and pupil wellbeing

The Conservatives say they would deliver 60,000 more school places and 15 new free schools for children with special educational needs, while the Green Party focus on provision in mainstream schools with £5bn of investment in special educational needs. Offering additional provision via new schools is likely to mean considerable time before those places are available, often taking many years between application and opening.[77][78] Labour would take a "community wide approach" by supporting provision in both special and mainstream schools though no further detail is given beyond improving expertise in mainstream schools. EPI has previously proposed a national framework of support for pupils with SEND in mainstream schools.[79]

The Liberal Democrats commit to provide additional funding to local authorities to pay towards the cost of each pupil's EHCP, but the amount offered or how that is determined is not clear. They also propose a national body for SEND to fund support, but again the level of funding or the role of the body, such as whether it is a central procurement function, is not set out.

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats would offer a mental health worker in every school alongside wider community support, while the Green Party would give pupils at state-funded schools access to a qualified counsellor and an on-site medical professional. None of the parties are currently clear on the exact type of the professional they are proposing.

[75] Megan Lucas and Jenna Julius, 'The ongoing impact of cost-of-living crisis on schools', (National Foundation for Educational Research, June 2024)
[76] Claire Crawford, Amy Edwards, Christine Farquharson, Ellen Greaves, Grace Trevelyan, Emma Wallace, and Clarissa White, 'Magic Breakfast', (November 2016)
[77] Samantha Booth, 'Promised special free schools fail to open', *Schools Week*, 26September, 2022.
[78] The Observer, '"It's an absolute mess": building work seriously delayed on 33 new special schools in England', (March 2024)
[79] Jo Hutchinson, 'Identifying pupils with special educational needs and disabilities', (March 2021)

Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) currently cover a third of schools (40 per cent of pupils), and are expected to reach half of all pupils by 2025. Evaluation of the programme is ongoing and so its impact is as yet unclear. The policy has though been criticised throughout the sector for its slow rollout.

The proposal of a mental health professional in every school could possibly be rolled into this existing policy, but questions remain about the roles of each and how they would work together. One professional per school likely means more individual focus on the children who need it, but a team of different professionals fulfils multiple necessary roles. There are also questions also about how quickly the new policy could be rolled out given workforce constraints.

Regardless of how interventions are rolled out, there must be a focus on the drivers of worsening mental health. This means looking beyond the healthcare system, and healthcare interventions delivered in and out of schools, at what the education system and wider factors such as child poverty are contributing to young people's worsening mental health.

As part of their reforms to accountability, the Labour Party is proposing annual checks on safeguarding, attendance and off-rolling though they need to set out how this will operate in practice and how it relates and interacts with other aspects of the accountability system. The current high-stakes nature of inspection can have the unintended consequence of incentivising people to 'hide' issues rather than acknowledge them and seek help. The nature of safeguarding risks is constantly evolving, and all schools require regular training and feedback.

Reform UK say that there should be child friendly app restricted smart phones for pupils under the age of 16 and the Conservative Party say that they will require schools to follow current guidance and ban use during the school day. Current government guidance is for school leaders to "develop and implement a policy to prohibit the use of mobile phones and other similar devices which reflects their school's individual contexts and needs." Survey data suggests that nearly two thirds of secondary schools have rules meaning that teachers should never see phones, and less than 1 per cent of schools would allow pupils to use phones whenever they liked.[80]

Reform UK would also launch an inquiry into social media harms. Heavy use of social media is shown to negatively affect girls' wellbeing and self-esteem at ages 14 and 17, regardless of pre-existing levels. It also negatively affects boys' wellbeing at age 14, also regardless of their previous state of mental health.[81]

Whilst relationship and sex education is not an issue that we have identified as one of the major challenges facing the school system ahead of the election, it is one that has nevertheless featured across party manifestos, stemming from the Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges.[82] The Liberal Democrats say that they would tackle bullying in schools by promoting pastoral leadership in schools and delivering high-quality relationships and sex education and the

[80] Teacher Tapp, 'Phone policies, side hustles, rote learning and pride', (February 2024)
[81] Whitney Crenna-Jennings, 'Young people's mental and emotional health', (Education Policy Institute, January 2021)
[82] Ofsted, 'Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges', (June 2021)

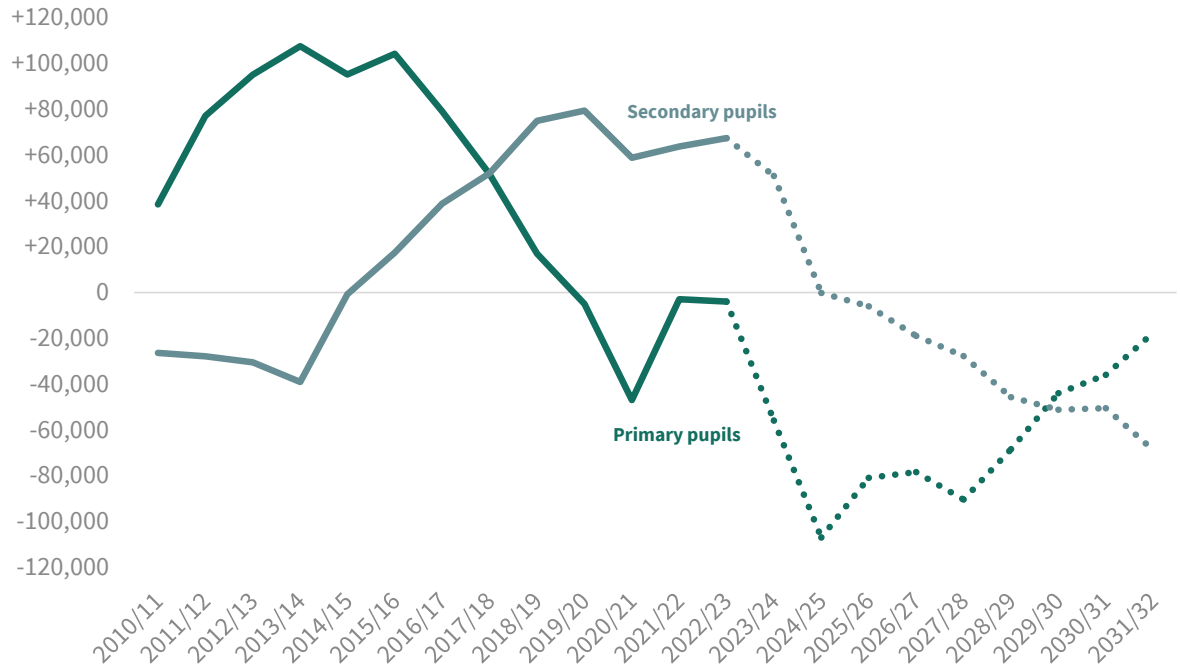
Green Party commit to an age-appropriate programme of relationships, sex, and health education. The Conservative Party would legislate so that parents had a right to see what was being taught in schools as well as going further on previously published Sex Health Education Guidance. Reform would also inform parents of under 16s about their children's life decisions, insist on single sex facilities, and ban social transitioning.

While it is important that young people have access to high quality pastoral care and relationships and sex education, there are difficult issues around the content and age at which such issues should be taught. These sensitive matters should be informed by the expertise of the medical profession and safeguarding experts to best support the short and long-term outcomes of young people.

Structural reform

Both the Labour Party and the Green Party have committed to ending the VAT exemption on independent school fees. Analysis from the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates such a change would raise around £1.3-1.5bn each year after accounting for changes in demand and public spending need.[83] The same analysis suggests that the effect of imposing VAT on independent school fees would be for between 3 and 7 per cent of independent school pupils to move into the state sector, equivalent to between 20,000 and 40,000 pupils. It is difficult to model the exact effects of such movements on school admissions and ultimately class sizes, but at a system level these moves in isolation would represent a very small increase in the state-school population of between 0.3 and 0.5 per cent. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 1.2, fluctuations of this scale are not unusual in the state-sector. Taken with the expected fall in pupil numbers over the coming parliament, the move of pupils into the state-sector is unlikely to represent a significant challenge to the system as a whole, though local challenges are possible.

Figure 1.2: Year on year changes in the total number of pupils in the state-funded school system – actual (solid line) and projected (dotted line).[84]



The Liberal Democrats directly address the functions and funding of local authorities in education with a commitment to give them both the resources (though not clear what this means in practice) and powers for local authorities to manage place planning, in year admissions, and provision for special educational needs for all schools within the local authority. Labour make a similar pledge

[83] Luke Sibieta, 'Tax, private school fees and state school spending', (Institute for Fiscal Studies, July 2023)
[84] Author's calculations based on Department for Education, 'National pupil projections: reporting year 2023', (October 2023). See Annex for further details of this calculation.

requiring all schools to co-operate with the local authority on admissions, special educational needs and place planning.

The Green Party would move academies into local authority control but, beyond this, no other party is committing to substantial changes to school organisation – either reversing academisation, or accelerating it further. The Conservative Party will expand strong academy trusts which is a continuation of current government policy of expecting schools to join academy trusts but not mandating them to do so, other than in the case of an inadequate Ofsted rating.[85] Avoiding wholesale reform to school structures – either with further rapid expansion of academies or reverting all schools back to local authorities – is consistent with evidence that finds no relationship between such changes and improved pupil outcomes.[86]

In May 2024, the government launched a consultation to make two changes to faith school provision in England.[87] The first was to remove the 50 per cent cap on faith admissions that applies to faith free schools as they claimed this acted as a barrier to some faith groups opening schools, this has been included in the Conservative manifesto. The second was to allow new special academies and existing special academies to be designated as having a religious character.

Faith schools tend to be less representative of their local area in terms of the proportion of disadvantaged pupils,[88] and the number of children with special educational needs and disabilities than other schools,[89] while their attainment outcomes are on average no different from other schools once you take pupil demographics into account.[90] Therefore, an expansion in the number of faith schools is unlikely to raise attainment overall, but may increase social segregation.

The Conservative Party say they will "preserve the rights of independent and grammar schools". The intent here is not clear, but any expansion in the number of grammar school places – either through the opening of new selective schools, or the expansion of existing schools – is likely to have negative effects on the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.[91]

Overall assessment

There are many components of party proposals that align with the approaches we identified to tackle some of the key challenges in our education system though no party alone appears to be addressing them all.

Reforming the accountability system, and in particular Ofsted, is a key component of both the Labour and the Liberal Democrat manifestos. The move away from single word judgements to report card style approaches is consistent with EPI recommendations for the government to

[85] Department for Education, 'What are academy schools and what is "forced academisation"?', (May 2023)
[86] Jon Andrews and Natalie Perera, 'The Impact of Academies on Educational Outcomes', (Education Policy Institute, July 2017)
[87] Department for Education, 'Faith school designation reforms', (May 2024)
[88] National Foundation for Educational Research, 'Selective comprehensives 2024', (January 2024)
[89] Tammy Campbell, 'Serving their communities? The under-admission of children with disabilities and special educational needs to faith primary schools in England', *Oxford Review of Education*, (October 2023)
[90] Jon Andrews and Rebecca Johnes, 'Faith schools, pupil performance, and social selection', (Education Policy Institute, December 2016)
[91] Jon Andrews et al, 'Grammar schools and social mobility', (Education Policy Institute, September 2016)

introduce new performance measures that mitigate some of the perverse incentives in the current system. Similarly, Labour's proposal to bring multi-academy trusts into the remit of inspection reflects the structure of the school system in 2024 and the role that trusts play in school finance, curriculum, and workforce.

There has also been a welcome focus on supporting children and young people with their mental health, with both Labour and the Liberal Democrats pledging to introduce a mental health professional into every school. What is less clear is the exact form that this will take, and how it interacts with mental health support team provision currently being rolled out. There are also very welcome commitments from the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats for various forms of a register of pupils not being educated in schools. This was a key recommendation from our first report.

Curriculum reform did not feature as part of our immediate priorities for an incoming government. Firstly, because we considered that there were already more pressing concerns, and secondly that there had been a number of changes in recent years that schools had only just adapted to. However, we recognise that by the end of the next parliament it would have been fifteen years since the last review and therefore the proposals from both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats are understandable. Beyond the Liberal Democrats Tuition Guarantee, the manifestos offered little that was particularly targeted at tackling the disadvantage gap but reforms to the curriculum may be one way in which we see a move to a system that works better for all pupils. Furthermore, the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats all make pledges to varying degrees to improve access to extra-curricular activities such as sports and music – opportunities that young people from low-income backgrounds are currently less likely to take up.

Unlike previous elections, there appears to be little appetite from the main parties for fast paced structural reform in terms of rapid expansion of the academies programme or a return to local authority-maintained schools, this is welcome and supported by evidence that structural reform has little or no effect on pupil outcomes.

The Conservatives maintain a desire for schools to be in 'strong' academy trusts though set no timescale by which this should be achieved. As we set out previously, it is important that the sector continues to build its understanding of what effective school groups do. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats appear to have no plans to row back the academised system but do commit to a stronger role for local authorities in admissions, place planning, and special educational needs. This is something we called for in our first report and will be particularly important during a period of falling pupil rolls. The Green Party is alone in wanting to move academies back under local authority control.

Of pressing concern is the lack of urgency and detail about how the parties would support pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. While there are some commitments across Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and the Conservative party including the establishment of a SEND body, greater support and expertise in mainstream schools, and new specialist provision, no single party addresses the challenges of the SEND system holistically, and all would require significantly more detail.

Post-16 and higher education

Post-16 and higher education

The current landscape

The 16-19 disadvantage gap keeps widening. While the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers was stable before the pandemic, the gap has widened by nearly a third of a grade since 2019.[92] Even more concerningly, the gap for persistently disadvantaged students widened even further, and was an entire grade wider than the main disadvantage measure, with disadvantaged students 4.5 grades behind non-disadvantaged students in 2022.[93] Regionally, the gap has widened the most in the North West where disadvantaged students were 5.6 months behind their peers, though the change in the gap since 2019 grew the most in the North East.[94] The widening gap between attainment suggests that disadvantaged students need to be better supported.

The Advanced British Standard is a welcome change but makes the future structure of the 16-19 phase unclear. The government's introduction of the Advanced British Standard (ABS) addresses a number of longstanding concerns. By requiring maths and English until the age of 18, the proposal will aim to reverse the trend of poor adult literacy and numeracy in the UK. Students will also have the opportunity to realise the benefits of a broadened curriculum while the proposal will attempt to close the gap in parity of esteem between academic and technical education by rolling A levels and T levels into a single qualification.[95] To guarantee the success of the ABS, there will need to be significant changes to the workforce and more detail on whether students will have flexibility to study at different levels.

The future of T levels and other smaller qualifications hang in the balance. With the introduction of ABS, T levels may be scrapped within the decade. Some shorter qualifications have already been defunded, therefore reducing student choice and creating the risk of leaving students behind for whom T levels prove too large. This is particularly concerning as roughly a quarter of all students and 40 per cent of disadvantaged students enrol in higher education with only BTECs or a mix of BTECs and A level qualifications.[96]

Although designed for younger adults to receive on the job experience and tend to promote positive employment outcomes, **younger apprentice numbers are on the decline**.[97] The number of under 19 starts has fallen significantly from 2015-16 (131,400) to 2022-23 (77,700) with younger apprentices accounting for 23 per cent of all starts in 2022-23.[98,99] Comparatively, 48 per cent of starts in 2022/23 were by learners aged 25 or over.[3] While the exact reasons for changes in employer behaviour are unclear, likely explanations include but are not limited to: increasing preference for level 4+ apprenticeships amongst levy-paying employers, smaller sized employers face challenges due to limited funds, and declining Intermediate and Advanced

[92] Education Policy Institute, 'Disadvantage (16-19)', (October 2023)
[93] Education Policy Institute, 'Disadvantage (16-19)', (October 2023)
[94] Education Policy Institute, 'Regional Gaps', (October 2023)
[95] Department for Education, 'A World-Class Education System - The Advanced British Standard', (October 2023)
[96] Catherine Dilnot, Lindsey Macmillan, and Gill Wyness, 'Educational Choices at 16-19 and University Outcomes', (January 2022)
[97] Social Mobility Commission, 'Apprenticeships and Social Mobility', (June 2020)
[98] Niamh Foley, 'Apprenticeship Statistics' (House of Commons Library, 30 March 2021)
[99] Department for Education, 'Apprenticeships and Traineeships, Academic Year 2022/23', (30 November 2023)

apprenticeships amongst smaller firms.[100] The number of apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds has also decreased.

The proposed changes to the curriculum via the ABS, the defunding of shorter qualification to create space for T levels, and falling starts amongst younger apprentices may leave young people without a clear route in the 16-19 phase in the upcoming years. The next government will need to be transparent about trade-offs in prioritising different post-16 routes and examine the impact it will have on different subpopulations.

Turning to higher education, budget deficits amongst providers is on the rise, leading to overreliance on unsustainable funding sources. Between 2015 and 2020, the proportion of providers operating on an annual deficit increased from 5 per cent to 32 per cent. The financial sustainability of the sector further deteriorated after the pandemic with the Office for Students (OfS) expecting 40 per cent of providers to overspend in 2023/24.[101] The shortfall in funding has partially been attributed to the stagnant student fees that were set at £9,000 in 2012 and have only seen a modest increase since. Up-front spending on teaching resources per higher education student has continued to decline steadily, standing at £9,600 per year for the 2023–24 university entry cohort. This is around £2,100 or 18 per cent lower in real terms than in 2012–13, largely because the cap on tuition fees is now 24% lower in real terms than it was in 2012–13.[102] To make up for the shortfall, universities have increasingly turned to international students whose fees are uncapped, but whose numbers remain vulnerable to wider immigration policies. OfS has suggested that universities may also explore changing course delivery models or eliminating costlier courses, both of which would alter students' experience in higher education.[103]

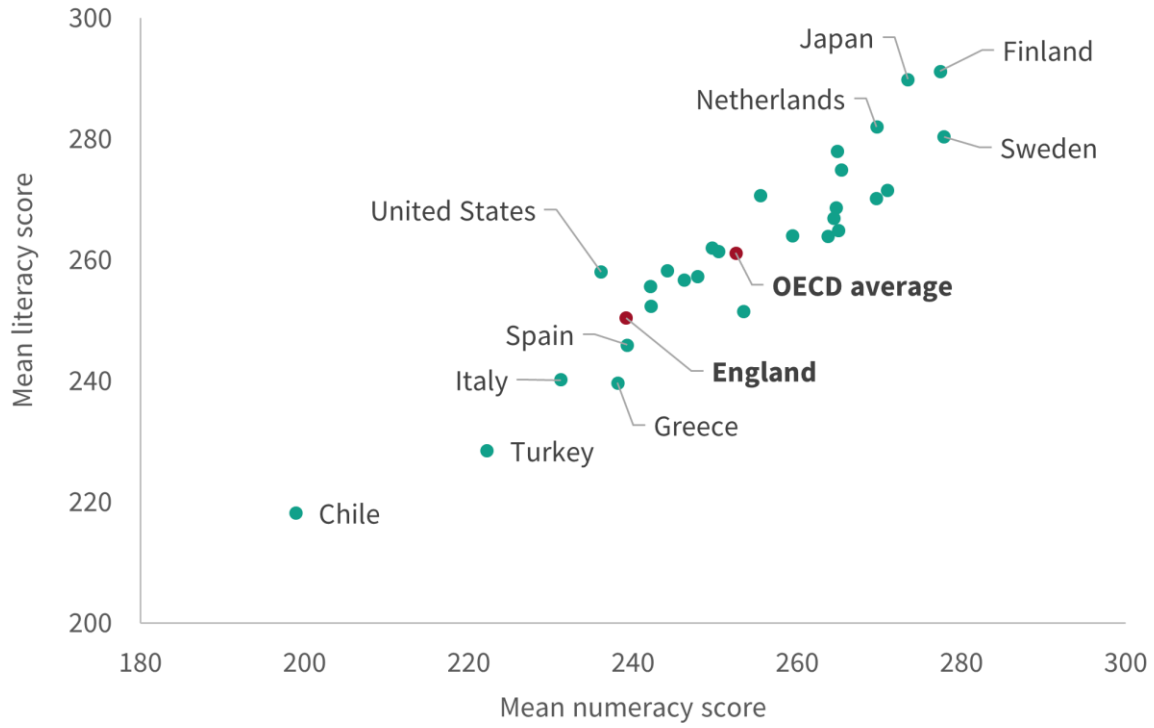
Higher education is becoming increasingly unaffordable. Students often finance their higher education in two ways: one, they receive loans to cover their course fees, and two, they receive maintenance loans to cover their cost of living during their higher education degree. Although the structure of the loan repayment system intends to be progressive and provide relief for lower earning graduates, reduction of the repayment threshold (£25,000) and extension of the repayment period (from 30 to 40 years) has made loan repayment more regressive.[104] Under the new 2023/24 repayment structure, graduates in the 4th earnings decile will repay the most over their lifetime (£63,100, compared to £55,000 for those in the 9th decile), amounting to 3.3 per cent of their lifetime earnings (compared to 1.1 per cent for those in the 9th decile).[105] At the same time, students in 2024/25 will be £2,000 poorer as a result of uncorrected inflation forecasts and

[100] Chiara Cavaglia, Sandra McNally, and Guglielmo Ventura, 'The Recent Evolution of Apprenticeships' (Sutton Trust, December 2022).
[101] Office for Students, 'Financial Sustainability of Higher Education Providers in England 2024', (May 2024)
[102] Elaine Drayton et al, 'Annual report on education spending in England: 2023', (IFS, December 2023)
[103] Office for Students, 'Financial Sustainability of Higher Education Providers in England', (May 2023)
[104] London Economics, 'Alternative Options for higher Education Fees and Funding for England', (May 2023)
[105] London Economics, 'Alternative Options for higher Education Fees and Funding for England', (May 2023)

minimal increases to maintenance support, leading to increased number of skipped meals and additional term time work, which in turn may lead to poorer degree outcomes.[106,107,108]

Funding adult education and closing the skills gap remains of utmost importance. Concerningly, nine million adults in England have low numeracy or literacy skills, and five million are lacking both.[109] As shown in Figure 1.3, mean literacy and numeracy skills amongst non-tertiary educated adults in England is lower than most OECD countries, while other reports indicate that one in ten graduates have low basic skills.[110] And while the adult education budget has seen an increase in real terms since 2019-20, current spending levels are still 23 per cent below those in 2009-10, and more than 40 per cent below for classroom based education.[111] Implementation of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) will increase provision of adult education, though provision will be at higher levels (levels 4+).

Figure 1.3: Mean numeracy and literacy scores in OECD countries



Source: OECD, 'Survey of adult skills, Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies' 2012 & 2015.

[106] Kate Ogden and Ben Waltmann, 'Large Real Cuts to Student Financial Support to become Permanent', (Institute for Fiscal Studies, January 2023)
[107] Sutton Trust, 'General Election Policy Briefing', (March 2024)
[108] Sarah Jewell, 'The Impact of Working While Studying on Educational and Labour Market Outcomes,' *Business and Economics Journal*, (October 2014)
[109] Learning and Work Institute, 'Getting the Basics Right: The Case for Action on Adult Basic Skills', (October 2021)
[110] Małgorzata Kuczera, Simon Field, and Hendrickje Catriona Windisch, 'Building Skills for All: A Review of England', (OECD, 2016)
[111] Institute for Fiscal Studies, 'Adult Education and Skills,' (December 2023)

What should a new government do?

- **Introduce additional funding for providers that better supports disadvantaged students in the form a student premium.** These additional funds should be used to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and non-disadvantaged students.
- **Incentivise employers and younger apprentices to offset falling apprenticeship numbers.** Provide financial support to small and medium sized employers to increase provision of intermediate and advanced apprenticeships.
- **Broaden the 16-19 curriculum, including high quality English and maths provision, whilst ensuring that reforms don't lead to more students studying at lower levels**. Diversity of post-16 routes should be maintained such that students are not forced to study at lower levels due the size or structure of the qualification.
- **Ensure high quality and sustainable higher education provision** via a stable funding model that meets the growing demand for tertiary education and matches spending in other OECD countries. Government should clearly outline the trade-offs that will result for students from stabilising providers' budgets.
- **Create a progressive student financing model that ensures disadvantaged students are sufficiently supported**. Overall maintenance support should be increased to reflect recent increases in inflation and should then be maintained in real terms. Additionally, the loan repayment terms should ensure that both low and medium earning graduates repay less than the highest earners.
- **Increase the adult education budget and provide maintenance support for reskilling.** Reversing falling numeracy and literacy skills amongst adults should be prioritised by increasing the adult education budget, especially for classroom-based education.

What are the parties proposing?

Post-16 qualifications

Low numeracy and literacy rates amongst 18-year-olds has been a key issue in the sector to which the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are offering a broader curriculum as a solution. In their manifesto, the Conservatives pledged to push ahead with the ABS if re-elected and make maths and English compulsory until the age of 18. The Liberal Democrats offered a review the breadth of the qualifications at 18 as their solution to ensure that they 'draw on best practices' and promote basic skills and cognitive development but do not make a commitment of mandating maths and English until 18.

Labour has indicated that it will support the existing T levels policy but will review the options available at level 3. Diversity of offering at level 3 is critical to ensuring all students have the opportunity to progress to higher levels of education.[112]

The Liberal Democrats have proposed introducing a Young People's premium that will support disadvantaged students in the 16-19 phase of education. Additional support in this stage is crucial

[112] Mary Curnock Cook, 'Defunding BTECs Could Cause HE Participation to Fall off a Cliff', (WonkHE, June 2024)

especially with the widening attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students. This policy aligns with our recommendation to introduce a student premium. The Green Party has called for the restoration of Educational Maintenance Allowance, which provided a small amount of discretionary funds to economically disadvantaged students from 1999 to 2011.[113] An evaluation of the first year of the program in pilot areas found that there was between 3 and 11 per cent increase in full-time education.[114]

Careers advice

Labour has pledged to implement a number of policies in hopes of boosting youth employment figures. The Party plans to train more than 1,000 new careers advisers and create a network of "Youth Futures" hubs that will support the most vulnerable young people. Systematically addressing young people's options is critical as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported increasing number of young people aged 16-24 Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). ONS estimated that 12.6 per cent of all young people were NEET in March 2024.[115] To maximise impact, Labour should consider increasing the attractiveness of the career advisor role as recommended by the Independent Review of Careers to Guidance from Ofsted to achieve the goal of hiring 1,000 new advisors.[116] While Labour has not released numbers on the cost of these policies, reports suggest that Labour will fund these proposals by instating VAT for private schools and closing tax loopholes for private equity investors.[117] Labour also plans to provide 'two weeks of work experience for every young person' in an effort to introduce the variety of options available after 16. The experience will be coordinated by local advisers and hubs. Labour estimates that new advisers and coordinating work experience for young people will cost £85m. The feasibility of the plan is unclear as it will require employer buy-in.

The Liberal Democrats also plan to 'strengthen careers advice' and improve links with 'employers in schools and colleges' but do not detail how the goal will be achieved. The Conservatives did not offer a plan to strengthen careers advice.

Apprenticeships

The Conservatives have proposed reversing falling apprenticeships starts amongst young people by diverting funding away from low performing higher education courses and investing it in apprenticeships. In previous statements, the party indicated that this cut would affect courses that teach 13 per cent of undergraduate students.[118] Increasing starts amongst young apprentices is a welcome proposal, especially after the notable decline since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. This proposal goes hand in hand with the announcement by Conservatives in government to remove co-investment payment by small and medium sized employers for apprentices under 22 and increase the cap on the transfer between levy-paying and other

[113] Alice Weavers, 'Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)', (Edge Foundation, May 2021)
[114] Centre for Research in Social Policy and Institute for Fiscal Studies, 'Education Maintenance Allowance: The First Year', (May 2001)
[115] Office for National Statistics, 'Young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), UK: May 2024', (May 2024)
[116] Ofsted, 'Independent Review of Careers Guidance in Schools and Further Education and Skills Providers', (September 2023)
[117] Sean Seddon and Kate Whannel, 'Labour: Young People will be Expected to Take Up Work and Training', *BBC*, 4 March, 2024.
[118] Hazel Shearing and Alice Evans, 'Tories would Swap 'Rip-Off' Degrees for Apprenticeships,' *BBC*, 28 May, 2024.

businesses from 25 to 50 per cent.[119] However, the proposal to cut funding from higher education for 100,000 apprenticeships presents three notable challenges. First, cutting courses for 13 per cent of the current university student population will leave 32,750 students without a plan.[120] Second, higher education does not have any caps which would ensure that only 25 per cent student go on to pursue a different degree. [121] If the number exceeds 25 per cent, it will reduce the number of planned apprenticeships starts. Lastly, the proposal does not indicate how they will identify low performing course, especially when causality between course quality and labour market outcomes is not yet established.[122]

Labour plans to increase flexibility in the use of the Apprenticeship Levy by converting it into a Growth and Skills Levy. Under this change, employers will be allowed to use up to 50 per cent of the levy to fund approved training courses besides apprenticeships. This proposal come at a time when employer investment is falling and nearly £100m (4 per cent) of the levy was unspent.[123,124] A concern of this proposal, however, is that the additional funding for other training will divert funding away from for apprenticeships, which have already fallen dramatically amongst under 19s. Additional funding for apprenticeships will be necessary if the Labour party intends to maintain or increase apprenticeship starts.[125] And lastly, increasing the flexibility of the levy increases the possibility for deadweight where employers may use the levy to fund training which they would have originally funded themselves, but now subsidised by the taxpayer.[126] Labour has proposed introducing an approved list of training courses to partially address this concern. The Liberal Democrats have also called for a more flexibility in the existing apprenticeship levy by orienting it towards skills and funding but do not offer further detail. The Liberal Democrats also seek to incentivise younger apprentices by replacing the 'lower apprentice rate' with the National Minimum Wage. To successfully reverse falling starts, parties should also consider incentivising employers to increase the provision of lower level apprenticeships.

Higher education funding, tuition fees and student support

On student finances, the Conservatives plan to continue with the 2022-23 finance regime in England (£25,000 repayment threshold, 40-year repayment period, and removal of real interest rates) if re-elected. The lower repayment threshold remain frozen until 2026-27 and will thereafter be adjusted according to the Retail Price Index (RPI). Some estimates suggest that under the new regime, the proportion of graduates who do not repay the full loan will falls from 80 to 40 per cent, and the proportion of graduates who never repay anything will fall from 21 to 8 per cent, while the average lifetime repayment increases from £40,100 to £45,800.[127] While it reduce the cost borne by

[119] Billy Camden, 'Sunak to Scrap SME Co-Investment for Young Apprentices', *FE Week*, 18 March, 2024.
[120] David Kernohan, 'Conservatives Reheat the Poor Quality Course Question,' (WonkHE, May 2024)
[121] Shane Chowen, 'Conservatives Pledge 100,000 Apprenticeship Boost', *FE Week*, 28 May, 2024.
[122] Gill Wyness, 'University Degrees: How should We Assess Their Value?', (Economic Observatory, June 2024)
[123] Department for Education, 'Employer Skills Survey', (August 2018).
[124] Billy Camden, 'DfE Records 96m Apprenticeship Underspend in 2022-23,' *FE Week*, 26 September, 2024.
[125] Niamh Foley, 'Apprenticeship Statistics' (House of Commons Library, 30 March 2021)
[126] Christine Farquharson, Luke Sibieta, and Imran Tahir, 'Labour's 'Growth and Skills' Levy would Give More Flexibility to Firms – but Employers would Still Need to get on Board,' (Institute for Fiscal Studies, June 2024)
[127] London Economics, 'Alternative Options for Higher Education Fees and Funding for England', (May 2023)

the taxpayer, repayments have become more regressive with the financial burden shifting more towards low- and middle-income graduates who are more likely to be female.

The Liberal Democrats have proposed conducting a review of the impact of higher education finances on 'access, participation and quality' as well as ensuring that 'there are no more retrospective raising of rates or selling-off of loans to private companies.' A review should make clear the trade-offs in pursuing different policies when stabilising university finances and the subpopulations that they will impact. The Liberal Democrats stance on removing international students from official long-term migration numbers and reporting them separately may also support the financial health of the HE sector. There were close to 680,000 international students studying in the UK in 2021-22, comprising 24 per cent of the university student population,[128] and their uncapped fee status means that they are a key funding source for higher education institutions.

Labour will aim to widen participation, but do not offer additional details. Equally, Labour has identified the ways in which the current system is regressive and will seek to reduce the financial burden of lower- and middle-income graduates, though it has not committed to the progressive financing model that it will choose the pursue. The party also does not offer a plan for balancing budgets despite the increasing deficits amongst higher education institutions.

The Green Party has proposed abolishing tuition fees as their alternative to the current student finance system. The cost of this policy would amount to approximately £10.4bn per year and is less targeted than the current financing structure under which those with financial capacity do repay the loans and reduce the strain on public finances.[129] Abolishing tuition fees would be more costly than the Conservatives' 2022-23 finance regime under which the cost to the exchequer amounts to £2.8bn per year. [130]

Reform UK have proposed extending the repayment period to 45 years and eliminating interest on student loans. These changes will make the repayment structure more regressive with low- and middle-income graduates repaying a greater percentage of their lifetime earnings, while the exchequer will bear a greater cost without interest rates.

The Green Party have also proposed reinstating maintenance grants and to 'fully fund' all students. The proposal goes beyond the Augar Review's recommendation of reinstating maintenance grants for disadvantaged students.[131] Maintenance grants in England were scrapped in 2017 and replaced in the form of income-contingent loans for all students. It is unclear from the pledge whether fully funding students means covering their full living costs with grants. As with scrapping fees, funding all students is a regressive policy under which public finances which may

[128] Paul Bolton, Joe Lewis, and Melanie Gower, 'International Students in UK Higher Education', (House of Commons Library, May 2024)
[129] London Economics, 'Assessing the Cost of Removing Undergraduate Tuition Fees across the UK', (May 2024)
[130] London Economics, 'Alternative Options for Higher Education Fees and Funding for England', (May 2023)
[131] Philip Augar, Ivor Crewe, Jacqueline de Rojas, Edward Peck, Beverly Robinson, and Alison Wolf, 'Review of Post-18 Education and Funding', (May 2019)

be used to fund other social services will be diverted towards individuals with the means the fund their own higher education.

The Liberal Democrats will introduce a Student Mental Health Charter that will require universities to provide mental health care to students. They also commit to extending young people's mental health services up to the age of 25 to end the drop-off experienced by young people transitioning to adult services, as part of a broad package of mental health measures. The proposal comes at the backdrop of increasing Common Mental Disorders (CMDs) amongst university students and in society overall.[132] Moreover, the SEND code of practice now extends statutory duties to 25 years of age and the scientific consensus indicates that adolescence continues into the early twenties, consistent with providing additional support to this age group.[133,134] These measures directly address key policy problems, and the key question is how they would be delivered, and in particular how the NHS and wider mental health professional workforce would be expanded sufficiently.

The Liberal Democrats would also implement statutory duty of care for university students. Exercising safeguarding duties for university students presents numerous challenges that are not otherwise present in the earlier phases of education,[135] especially when 28 per cent of children and adolescents referred to CAMHS were waiting for support and 39 per cent did not receive any support before their referral was closed. [136] Success of this policy rests on how it would be implemented – specifically guidance on what universities are expected to do and who they should report to when they have concerns.

The Liberal Democrats have also pledged to align UK higher education with its counterparts in Europe and increase investment in research and development (R&D). The party would continue to be a part of Horizon Europe, allowing UK researchers to access crucial funding; joining the European Innovation Council; and increase the percentage of GDP spent on R&D to 3 per cent by 2030, and to 3.5 per cent by 2034. The UK spent 2.9 per cent on R&D in 2021 according to the OECD.[137]

Reform UK have also called for 2 year graduate courses in order to get graduates into the labour market as soon as possible. Some universities currently offer level 5 qualifications, such as Higher National Diplomas, which last two years. Reform UK would also restrict undergraduate numbers and introduce minimum entry requirements (MERs). While the party does not provide any further information on their policies, student number controls risk disproportionately harming disadvantaged students whilst the majority of students who do not meet MERs achieve good

[132] Office for Students, 'Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Students', (October 2023)
[133] Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, 'SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years', (June 2014)
[134] Susan Sawyer, Peter Azzopardi, Dakshitha Wickremarathne, and George Patton, 'The Age of Adolescence', *Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*, (March 2018)
[135] Universities UK, 'Petition for Debate: Creating a Statutory Legal Duty of Care for Students in Higher Education', (May 2023)
[136] Children's Commissioner, 'Over a Quarter of a Million Children Still Waiting for Mental Health Support', (March 2024)
[137] OECD, 'Gross Domestic Spending on R&D', (2024)

degree outcomes.[138] The party has also proposed cutting funding to universities that undermine free speech but do not offer detail on how free speech will be monitored.

The Conservatives would 'work with universities' in an effort to get exams marked and ensure contact hour requirements are met. The Conservative policy comes against the backdrop of strike action across universities in the UK in 2023.[139]

Technical education, lifelong skills and employment

There has been an increasing focus on non-academic routes in the post-16 and -18 education landscape with efforts to increase vocational and technical education as well as apprenticeships.

The Liberal Democrats state an ambition to 'improve the quality of vocational education' through a set of policies. The Liberal Democrats would address the skills gap by improving existing higher technical qualifications such as 'foundation degrees, Higher National Diplomas, Higher National Certification, and Higher Apprenticeships.' The UK has a low rate of enrolment in higher technical education compared to the other devolved nations, with rates in England particularly low as (4 per cent of full-time students in higher education were in technical education as compared to 18 and 11 per cent in Scotland and Northern Ireland, respectively).[140] Completion of a higher technical degree may increase socioeconomic mobility,[141] and these skills are in demand from employers. The Party, however, offers little detail on how they plan to improve quality and whether that will have a meaningful effect on take up.

The Liberal Democrats plan to further establish National Colleges as centres for expertise in crucial industries, citing renewable energy as an example, and develop the vocational skills necessary for businesses. Further education colleges under Labour will have the opportunity to become 'Technical Excellence Colleges' using funds from the Local Skill Improvement Plans (LSIPs). Historically, specialist colleges, however, are more likely to struggle with student enrolment and retention.[142,143,144] Greater support for further education colleges in general may be more likely to improve outcomes than funding a small number of specialist institutions.

The Labour Party has proposed the creation of Skills England, a national body that will identify opportunities for investment in skills development. This body will coordinate between 'business, training providers and unions' as well as all levels of government and take a 'sectoral approach' to developing skills capacity. Skills England will also coordinate with local areas to facilitate Labour's policy of devolving the adult skills budget. Labour has also previous indicated that it will keep the

[138] Richard Murphy, Judith Scott-Clayton, and Gill Wyness, 'The End of Free College in England: Implications for Enrolments, Equity, and Quality', *Economics of Education Review*, (August 2019)
[139] Joe Lewis, 'University Strike Action in the UK', (House of Commons Library, January 2024)
[140] Simon Field, 'The Missing Middle: Higher Technical Education in England', (Gatsby, 2018)
[141] Catherine Dilnot, Lindsey Macmillan, and Gill Wyness, 'The Path Increasingly Travelled: Vocational Entry Qualifications, Socioeconomic Status and University Outcomes', *British Educational Research Journal*, (August 2023)
[142] Department for Education, 'National College Process Evaluation', (February 2020)
[143] Billy Camden, 'Former National College to Officially Close Down', *FE Week*, 4 April, 2023.
[144] Gerard Dominguez-Reig and David Robinson, 'UTCs: Are They Delivering for Young People and the Economy', (Education Policy Institute, October 2018)

LLE if elected, though the party did not offer details on whether it would iterate upon the initial policy. Jobcentre plus would also be reformed under Labour.

The Conservatives promised to implement LLE by 2025 to facilitate re- and up-skilling and increase the take up of higher technical education. The policy will replace the higher education student finance and All Learner Loans and provide all eligible learners with a loan of £37,000 to be used on level 4 to 6 study. The Liberal Democrats have proposed creating a Lifelong Skills Grants that gives every adult £5,000 to spend throughout their lives on education and training. The policy does not include any guidance on the age at which an individual will receive grant. Assuming, however, that an individual will receive the grant at the age of 18, the policy will have an ongoing £3.9bn[145] per cohort by 2022 population estimates.[146] The Green Party would allocate £12bn in funding for skills and lifelong learning but does not provide further detail on how the funding would be used.

In an effort to improve socioeconomic mobility, Labour has proposed to ban unpaid internships. Since previous evidence demonstrates that young people have turned down opportunities to intern, despite evidence that internships are important for future career opportunities, due to increasing cost of living.[147] Labour's proposal, however, excludes internships designed for those in education and training which are crucial for future career development. Labour should examine whether exclusion of those in education and training reduces the reach of the policy.

Other policies

The Conservatives have proposed the introduction of National Service which would give 18-year-olds the choice of either serving in the military or volunteering for a weekend each month for a year. The purpose of the policy is to foster a sense of community and instil national pride in young people.[148] While extracurricular or enrichment activities are associated with a wide range of positive outcomes,[149] there is less evidence on the benefits of this type of activity when it is compulsory. Working to increase the range and accessibility of existing enrichment activities may be a better targeted intervention. Moreover, a targeted intervention is likely to be a cheaper policy alternative than the price tag of £2.5bn per year associated with National Service.

Overall assessment

There has been a significant focus on increasing participation in technical and vocational education, falling apprenticeship starts, and employer investment in training. Policies on skills have emphasised the importance of lifelong learning and harnessing higher level technical education in order to up- and re-skill the economy.

[145] See Annex for details of this estimate.
[146] Office for National Statistics, 'Population Estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland: Mid-2022', (March 2024)
[147] Carl Cullinane and Rebecca Montacute, 'Pay as you go? Internship pay, quality and access in the graduate jobs market', (Sutton Trust, November 2018)
[148] Sean Seddon, 'What is the Tory National Service Scheme and How Might it Work?', *BBC*, 26 May, 2024.
[149] David Robinson, 'Access to Extra-Curricular Provision and the Association with Outcomes', (Education Policy Institute, February 2024)

There has been little attention paid by parties to the disadvantage gap amongst 16-19 year olds, with the exception of the Liberal Democrats who have proposed a Young People's premium. This reflects one of EPI's key recommendations.

The Conservative's plans to implement the Advanced British Standard (ABS) is a welcome strategy in broadening the 16-19 curriculum and increasing the offering of maths and English until age 18. Given the demonstrated benefits of a wider curriculum, this policy will benefit disadvantaged students who are more likely to narrow their choices after GCSEs. Extending maths and English will align the UK with other leading global economies and address the falling literacy and numeracy rates amongst 18-year-olds. To guarantee the success of the ABS, there will need to be significant changes to the workforce and more detail on whether students will have flexibility to study at different levels.

The Liberal Democrats have also offered a review of the post-16 qualifications. Labour has offered to conduct a curriculum review but did not specifically address the narrowing of post-16 choices nor how to improve basic skills amongst young people. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have proposed strengthening careers advice to address the increasing NEET rates amongst 16–24-year-olds. The Conservatives have not offered new plans on careers advice.

Parties have offered various plans to reform apprenticeships. The Conservatives have proposed increasing apprenticeship starts and to fund this by cutting higher education courses, while Labour and the Liberal Democrats have proposed increasing the flexibility of the apprenticeship levy so it can be used more widely for skills and training. Increasing flexibility however is unlikely to reverse the trend of falling starts.

Labour and the Conservatives have committed relatively little to addressing issues in higher education. The key notable difference between the two parties has been on the provision of higher education. The Conservatives plan to reduce the provision of higher education by cutting poorly performing courses.

With respect to tuition fees, the Conservatives plan to continue the 2022-23 student finance regime, despite the increased burden on lower- and middle-income graduates, while Labour has committed to making the system more progressive it has not offered any further details as to how this would be achieved.

Neither party has addressed the instability of higher education budgets nor the overreliance on international students as a funding source. The Liberal Democrats have proposed removing international students from long-term migration numbers. While the Green Party have proposed abolishing student fees and reintroducing maintenance grants, the substantial price tag of the policies means that it is unlikely to be a priority for the next government with other areas of the economy requiring significant investment.

Beyond potential changes to student finance, neither Labour nor the Conservatives have offered detailed plans on widening participation despite the fact that the gap in progression rate to higher

education has widened to the highest recorded level.[150] While the Green Party would reintroduce maintenance grants and the Liberal Democrats will work to widen participation, partly through greater transparency in selection criteria, the lack of plans from Labour and the Conservatives to support disadvantaged students amidst a cost-of-living crisis is a notable omission. Additionally, little had been said about contextual admissions despite evidence that they widen participation without adversely affecting attainment or dropout.[151]

Parties have increasingly focused on technical and vocational education in efforts to up- and re-skill the economy. The Conservatives and Labour have indicated that they will continue with the Lifelong Learning Entitlement if elected, while the Liberal Democrats have said they would provide every adult with £5,000 for lifelong education and training. Labour would also establish Skills England and introduce a set of coordinated policies that will support local skills development. Assuming successful implementation, these policies are likely to increase take up of higher technical qualifications. Comparatively little has been said on increasing the take up of level 2 and level 3 qualifications amongst adults.

[150] Department for Education, 'Widening participation in higher education', (July 2023)
[151] Vikki Boliver, Claire Crawford, Mandy Powell, and Will Craige, 'Admissions in Context', (Sutton Trust, October 2017)

School and college funding

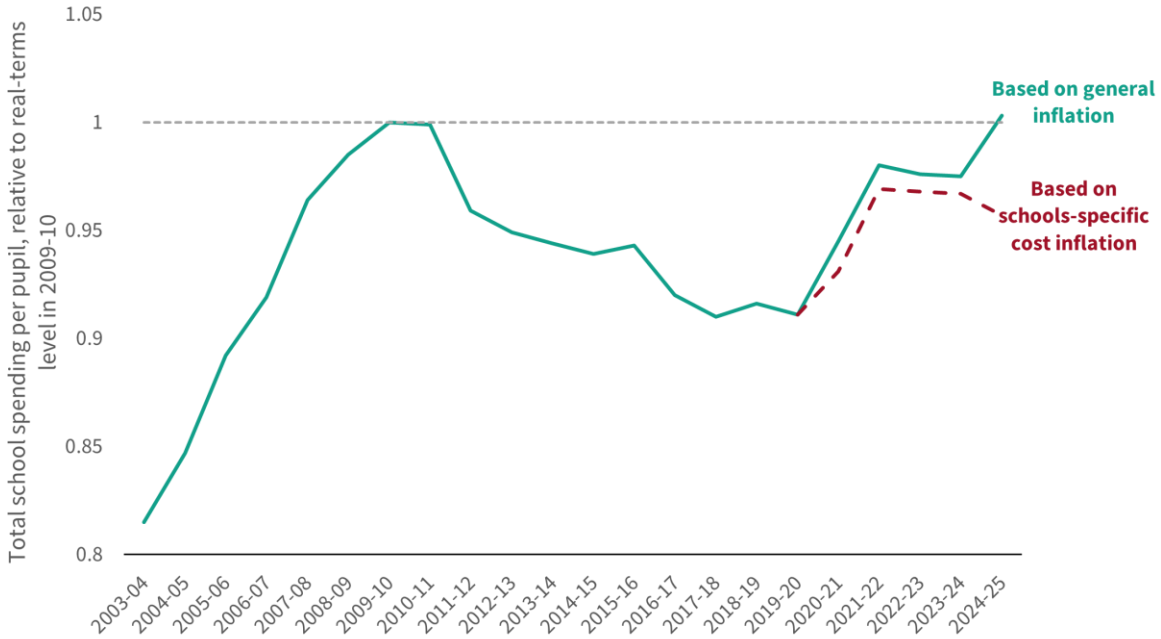
School and college funding

The current landscape

Schools have experienced a long-term funding squeeze, meaning we are not yet back to 2010 levels of funding. Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that school spending per pupil fell by 9 per cent in real terms in the decade to 2020. Recent increases in school funding will mean that per pupil funding will still be below 2009-10 levels in 2024-25, after accounting for school-specific rates of inflation such as increases in teacher pay.[152]

In April 2018, the Department for Education introduced the national funding formula (NFF) for schools to address some of the inequalities in school funding. However, there are no detailed and robust estimates of the cost of running a school. As such the NFF is designed to distribute the total pot of money consistently, based on a set of school and pupil characteristics, but is not necessarily consistent with a school being funded 'correctly'. The effects of the NFF, and the subsequent policy of 'levelling-up' funding for schools, have not been felt equally across schools. The design of the NFF has meant that, since 2018, additional funding has been disproportionately targeted towards schools that had historically lower levels of funding and these schools have tended to have less-disadvantaged intakes.[153]

Figure 1.4: School spending per pupil relative to 2009-10[152]



[152] Luke Sibieta, 'School spending in England: a guide to the debate during the 2024 general election', (Institute for Fiscal Studies, June 2024)
[153] Jon Andrews, Emily Hunt, and Shruti Khandekar, 'Education priorities in the next general election', (Education Policy Institute, July 2024)

There are also major differences in how schools and trusts spend their funding.[154] Type of expenditure is important for pupil outcomes and schools can draw on evidence to inform resource allocation and improve efficiency. Around half of all school revenue expenditure is on teachers with a further fifth on other staffing costs.[155] Additional expenditure on teachers and reducing pupil/teacher ratios is positively associated with GCSE outcomes and expenditure on support staff can have disproportionate benefits for some groups.[156] As part of a 2016 study by the National Audit Office (NAO), DfE estimated that a total of £3.0 billion of efficiencies could be made, comprising £1.3 billion through improved procurement and £1.7 billion through changes to staff deployment.[157]

Meanwhile, **funding for pupils with SEND has struggled to meet needs.** There is an ongoing rise in children and young people with SEND and Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). EHC plans identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support required to meet those needs. High needs funding and its distribution has struggled to cope with this rising demand. In January 2023 there were just over 389,000 pupils with an EHCP (or statement of special educational needs) in schools in England, an increase of over half in the preceding five years.[158] These numbers do not account for the number of pupils who are home educated because of a lack of suitable provision, nor, as concluded by the Education Select Committee, that special provision faces "practices of rationing, gatekeeping and, fundamentally, children and young people's needs being unidentified and unmet." The shortage of state-funded special school places is necessitating the use of independent providers at high costs.[159]

The funding squeeze in 16-19 education is bigger than that experienced by schools. Over the last decade, 16-19 funding has fallen in real terms while participation in full-time education has been on the rise. Cuts in 16-19 education have been at twice the rate of those in other school phases. The national base rate was frozen at £4,000 from 2013 until 2020, leading to a 9 per cent cut in real terms spending. Additionally, while the funding formula considers the area-based index of multiple deprivation (IMD), it does not consider individual student-level disadvantage, thereby excluding potential marginal increases from including both measures. Funding has been funnelled back into the system through T levels, and the funding formula in use today puts a greater emphasis on disadvantaged students than previously. T levels nonetheless continue to experience similar problems caused by funding shortfalls as in other parts of the 16-19 system, including poor pay and high staff turnover.

There has been under-investment in the school and college estate. Between 2016-17 and 2022-23 the Department for Education distributed an average of £2.3 billion a year in capital funding for school rebuilding, maintenance and repair. HM Treasury has allocated capital funding for 2021-25 amounting to £3.1 billion a year, well below the amount that DfE proposed was needed to

[154] Louis Hodge, Robbie Cruikshanks, Jon Andrews, and Oana Gavriloiu, 'The features of effective school groups', (April 2024)
[155] Jon Andrews, 'Understanding school revenue expenditure', (Education Policy Institute, September 2019)
[156] Cheti Nicoletti and Birgitta Rabe, 'The effect of school resources on test scores in England', (July 2012)
[157] National Audit Office, 'Financial sustainability of schools', (December 2016)
[158] Department for Education, 'Special educational needs in England', (June 2023)
[159] Gary Thomas, 'The increasing use of private special schools: a policy gap for inclusive education', (August 2023)

maintain schools and mitigate the most serious risks of building failure. The National Audit Office estimated that some 700,000 pupils are now learning in a school that requires major rebuilding or refurbishment.

Funding for tuition and extending the school day. One-to-one and small group tuition can be highly effective in supporting learning. The effects of extending the school day depend on how the time is used. It is most effective when it draws on existing and well-trained staff, integrated to existing classes and activities.[160] In the most effective implementations, school day extensions are linked with modest improvements in attainment.

What should a new government do?

Increase per pupil revenue funding, funded in part by the expected fall in pupil numbers, and increase capital expenditure. In particular, address the fact that the most disadvantaged schools have seen the smallest increases in recent years and the capital funding budget allocated to the Department for Education is below that required to maintain the school estate.

Ensure funding is targeted to help close the disadvantage gap and extend the reach of funding to particularly vulnerable groups. Raise the rate of the pupil premium to at least its previous level in real terms and consider additional funding targeted at persistently disadvantaged pupils, where the gap is the largest. Extend the pupil premium to support pupils with child protection plans and students in post-16 education and fund post-16 alternative provision.

Deliver consistent and sustained funding from secondary education onwards that is consistent across post-16 phases and education levels including adult skills to ensure that all pathways can be of high and equal quality, and students are able to transition between pathways. Address the particularly low funding of 16-19 education which is significantly below funding in other phases and low against international comparators.

Reform allocation of the high needs block of school funding, both increasing the overall level of funding to provide for increased prevalence of SEND and changing the funding formula to better reflect current need.

Support schools to deliver their wider role including reviewing and extending funding for an extended school day, particularly in disadvantaged schools, funding for mental health support in schools, and continuing to fund tuition.

What are the parties proposing?

Level and allocation of revenue funding

The current funding settlement for schools covers the 2024-25 financial year and any future years will be subject to announcements in either a budget or spending review by the end of 2024.

[160] Oana Gavriloiu, 'An evidence review into the length of the school day', (Education Policy Institute, February 2024)

The Liberal Democrats have committed to increase school and college funding per-pupil above the rate of inflation every year. Because of expected falls in pupil rolls, maintaining total funding for schools at current levels in real terms would lead to a 1.5 per cent real terms increase in per pupil funding per year to 2028.[161] In other words, the Liberal Democrat commitment on school funding could be met without increasing overall funding, though the increases would be relatively modest in historic terms. The Green Party would advocate for an increase of £8bn for schools including £2bn for teacher pay.

The Conservative Party would protect day-to-day schools spending in real terms per pupil. Because of falling rolls, holding per pupil funding flat in real terms would mean a reduction in total funding over the course of the next parliament.[162] As the associated savings are not shown within the manifesto costing document, we are interpreting this commitment as simply a minimum per pupil expenditure that would be delivered with no overall change to school budgets. However, it can also interpreted as a significant cut of up to £3.5bn if taken at face value.[163]

The Labour Party makes no specific commitment to either school or college revenue funding either on a per pupil or total funding basis other than specific commitments such as £450m identified to recruit new teachers and £270m on teacher and headteacher training. As with the Conservative party, significant extra expenditure or savings are not identified in the costings of the manifesto which may mean no overall change to school budgets.

The population in post-16 education is expected to increase over the course of the next parliament and so increasing per student funding in real terms, as proposed by the Liberal Democrats, will increase overall expenditure on further education. The Green Party would increase funding for sixth-form education by £3bn over the course of the next parliament. The Conservatives do not make a commitment to colleges in the way that they have for schools, but increasing the number of apprenticeships will increase expenditure on the sector.

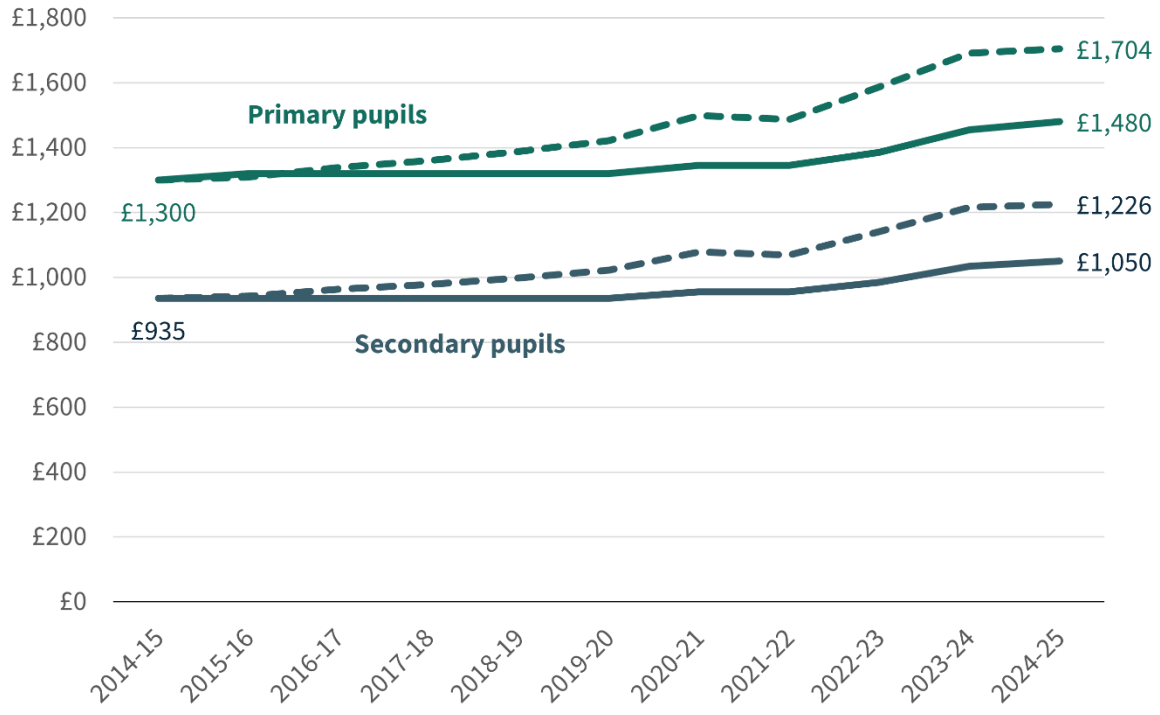
The Liberal Democrats have previously suggested that they would reverse the real terms cuts to the value of pupil premium, the additional funding allocated to schools based on the number of pupils who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years. However, there now appears to be no commitment to this in the manifesto, nor are there commitments from either Labour or the Conservatives.

In 2024-25 the value of the deprivation element of the pupil premium is set at £1,480 for primary aged pupils and £1,050 for secondary aged pupils.[164] However, the value of the pupil premium has not increased in line with inflation. For the pupil premium in 2024-25 to have the same purchasing power as the pupil premium in 2014-15 it would need to be set at £1,704 for primary aged pupils and £1,226 for secondary aged pupils, equivalent to additional funding of around £200 per pupil.

[161] Luke Sibieta, 'School spending in England: a guide to the debate during the 2024 general election', (Institute for Fiscal Studies, June 2024)
[162] Robbie Cruikshanks, 'School funding model: Effect of falling school rolls', (Education Policy Institute, April 2024)
[163] IFS, 'The Conservative manifesto: an initial response', (June 2024)
[164] Department for Education, 'Pupil premium: overview', (February 2024)

Based on pupil numbers in 2024-25, reversing these cuts to the pupil premium would cost around £400m.[165]

Figure 1.5: The value of the deprivation element of the pupil premium is now around £200 per pupil lower than if it had kept pace with rising prices[165]



No party is proposing any changes to how revenue funding in schools is allocated. We therefore assume that the weakened association between disadvantage and pre-16 funding that has been evident in recent years will persist at a time when the disadvantage gap is growing.

The Liberal Democrats would introduce a young people's premium, similar to the pupil premium in pre-16 education for disadvantaged pupils aged 16-18. We estimate that this will cost around £340m a year.[166] No other parties have committed to additional funding for disadvantaged students in post-16 education.

High needs funding

Given the highly perilous state of high needs funding there is concerningly very little from any of the main parties by way of commitment to either the level of funding offered, or how it is distributed. This poses a serious threat to both specialist provision and the financial sustainability of local authorities as a whole. The Liberal Democrats would provide additional funding to local authorities to pay towards the cost of each pupil's EHCP but the amount offered or how that is determined is not clear. They also propose a national body for SEND to fund support but again the

[165] See Annex for details of this estimate.
[166] Based on the young persons premium rate being set at the same level as for secondary pupils and existing participating rates of disadvantaged pupils in post-16 education. This is of a similar magnitude to the amount put forward by the Liberal Democrats.

level of funding or the role of the body is not set out. The Green Party would "push" for £5bn of extra funding for SEND provision in mainstream schools. The Conservative Party have pledged to deliver 15 new free schools for children with SEND, which while positive is not a sufficient measure to tackle the challenges to high needs funding. There are no clear commitments from the Labour Party on SEND funding.

Capital funding and the school and college estate

The challenges around the condition of the school and college estate, which was a major news story at the start of this academic year, has led to responses from the parties about capital investment. The Liberal Democrats say they would invest in new buildings and clear the backlog of repairs, while the Conservatives appear to be continuing with existing government policy of the School Rebuilding Programme, and the Green Party would invest £2.5bn a year to "keep schools well maintained and fit for purpose".

The Department for Education has estimated that it requires capital funding of £5.3bn a year between 2021 and 2025 to mitigate the most serious risks on the school estate and £7bn as 'best practice' for annual capital funding. It was instead allocated £3.1bn a year over the same period.[167] The Liberal Democrat commitment of £1.9bn per year (part funded through redirecting money for new free schools), the continuation of current policy from the Conservatives, and £2.5bn a year from the Green Party still falls short of the scale of expenditure the Department for Education had said was required. The Labour Party has said nothing on school capital.

Funding implications of other policies

Free school meals and breakfast clubs

Several parties have made commitments around breakfast clubs and extending the provision of free school meals. Currently, over two thirds of primary schools offer subsidised breakfasts and around half offer free school meals to those who would otherwise not be eligible.[168] The Labour party would provide breakfast clubs to all primary aged pupils. The Liberal Democrats would extend free school meals to all children living in poverty with a longer-term ambition to extend to all pupils in primary schools. The Green Party would go further than this and provide free school meals to all primary and secondary aged pupils.

Under the current national funding formula for schools, each child who is eligible for free school meals attracts funding of £490 that is "broadly intended to cover the cost of providing free meals" – this is equivalent to £2.53 per meal.[169] Including universal provision in infant schools, total government spending on free school meals is around £1.4bn.[170]

[167] National Audit Office, 'Condition of school buildings', (June 2023)
[168] Megan Lucas and Jenna Julius, 'The ongoing impact of cost-of-living crisis on schools', (National Foundation for Educational Research, June 2024)
[169] Department for Education, 'The national funding formulae for schools and high needs 2024-25', (October 2023)
[170] Jonathan Cribb, Christine Farquharson, Andrew McKendrick, and Tom Waters, 'The policy menu for school lunches: options and trade-offs in expanding free school meals in England', (Institute for Fiscal Studies, March 2023)

The IFS have modelled a range of expansion scenarios which provide context for commitments relating to free school meals.[170] Expanding free school meals to all primary and secondary aged pupils would cost an additional £2.5bn a year, restricting to just primary aged pupils would cost £1bn. The Liberal Democrats prioritising children in poverty – those on universal credit with an income cap of £20,000 – would mean an additional 900,000 pupils receiving free school meals at a cost of £425m.

These costings are on the basis of the current per pupil amounts used in the national funding formula. However, this rate has not kept pace with inflation and has lost about 16 per cent of its value in real terms based on the consumer price index. There is reason to believe that even allowing for this – which would cost an additional £250m on current entitlements alone – would not fully reflect the costs facing schools due to increases in the minimum wage over the same period. Nor does it allow for likely capital costs associated with a large expansion in provision.

VAT on independent school fees

Both the Labour Party and the Green Party have committed ending the VAT exemption on independent school fees. Reform say that they would remove VAT from independent school fees – which we take to mean that they would not apply VAT to independent school fees – and provide tax relief on spending in independent schools. Analysis from the IFS estimates applying VAT would raise around £1.3-1.5bn each year after accounting for changes in demand and public spending need.[171] Labour plan to use £1bn of this money raised to fund the remainder of their education policies including the recruitment of 6,500 teachers.

Mental health support in schools

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have committed to mental health support workers in every school. As set out above, it is not clear how this policy would interact with existing mental health support teams and so it is difficult to assess what the cost would be. Under an assumption of each mental health worker costing around £60,000 in salary and on-costs, this would translate to around £1.2bn a year once fully rolled out, falling to £400m if one worker covered five primary schools.[172] This does not include any training and recruitment costs. Labour have currently allocated £175m for mental health support workers in schools.

Overall assessment

The wider situation of government finances, and a position from the main parties not to increase some of the main tax rates has resulted in an offering that is exceedingly limited and does not address the challenges that schools and colleges are facing. While the education budget has been protected in recent years, relative to other areas of government expenditure, per pupil funding for

[171] Luke Sibieta, 'Tax, private school fees and state school spending', (Institute for Fiscal Studies, July 2023)
[172] In other words, equivalent of one day a week in primary school with one worker covering broadly the same number of pupils as in one secondary school. See Annex for details of this estimate.

schools is still 4 per cent lower than it was in 2010 if we account for the inflationary pressures in schools. The situation in further education colleges has been significantly worse.

Both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have commitments that are based on per pupil funding to schools (to protect in the case of the Conservatives and to increase above inflation for the Liberal Democrats). Given the expected fall in pupil rolls over the course of the next parliament, these commitments are at best modest. Simply holding total school funding flat in real terms would deliver a pledge to increase per pupil funding, and cutting it by over £3bn could still deliver a promise to protect per pupil funding. Labour has made no commitment at all on school funding, either per pupil or overall, beyond specific policy linked commitments such teacher training and development and teacher recruitment. In all cases it makes the overall funding package for schools very unclear.

The commitments to funding for sixth forms and further education colleges (as opposed to specific policy interventions in the phase) are even more limited, with no commitment from the Conservative Party or Labour. The Liberal Democrats pledge to increase per student funding in real terms, but there is nothing to suggest that this will be of the scale needed to reverse long-term cuts. However, the Liberal Democrat proposal to introduce a post-16 student premium is very welcome and consistent with what we said was needed to help address both participating and attainment gaps in this phase.

Beyond this pledge none of the parties have made specific commitments to changes to how revenue funding is allocated, or to the value of the pupil premium. If, as expected, the funding settlement for schools and colleges remains tight, then any government should seriously consider how revenue funding is better targeted to ensure it reaches the pupils and students that need it most. These are difficult trade-offs but necessary in the current spending climate.

Within this context, there are clear arguments that funding breakfast clubs and the expansion of free school meals to those just above existing eligibility thresholds is likely to lead to improvements in attendance and wellbeing. However, further expansion of free school meals to other pupils, at a time of limited funding, would be misguided and could be better targeted at where it is needed most.

Commitments to capital expenditure to address the condition of the school and college estate are also limited. The Department for Education has consistently spent less than it had deemed was necessary to address the most urgent of building repairs. Only the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party have made any commitment to address this need, though these would still appear to fall short of the levels that are really required.

The final, but most pressing concern, is that of high needs funding, for pupils with acute special educational needs. Commitments from the main parties are again limited, or do not set out what they will achieve and how they will do it. Whoever forms the next government must review funding for special educational need including how funding is allocated. The high needs budget should be grounded in the level of need across the population and the true cost of provision to address those needs. The current system does neither and therefore creates substantial financial instability. In addition, the government must take action to increase capacity within state-funded special

schools and address the high cost associated with private provision to reduce the cost of providing places. Schools, local authorities, and some of our most vulnerable children are at risk if the current situation is not addressed.

The education workforce

The education workforce

The current landscape

Teacher pay in England lags behind OECD nations and is critically low in FE colleges, while pay is uncompetitive particularly in shortage subjects. Real term cuts in teacher pay since 2010 has placed England at the bottom of OECD nations in terms of pay growth. While starting salaries have fallen by 3 per cent in real terms since, salaries of more experienced and senior teachers have fallen by as much as 12 per cent.[173,174,175] The relatively modest fall in the former category is reflective of the policy choice to increasing starting salaries to £30,000.[176] Perhaps even more concerningly, pay in FE colleges has fallen by 18 per cent over the same time period, with median pay for college teachers hovering at £34,500[177] (compared to £40,300 for school teachers[178]).

As a result of real term cuts to teacher pay, shortage subjects such as STEM face significant challenges in recruitment and retention. Higher pay in competitor occupations particularly disincentivises younger teachers, as findings reveal that teachers under the age of 30 outside of London earn 10 per cent less than their peers.[179]

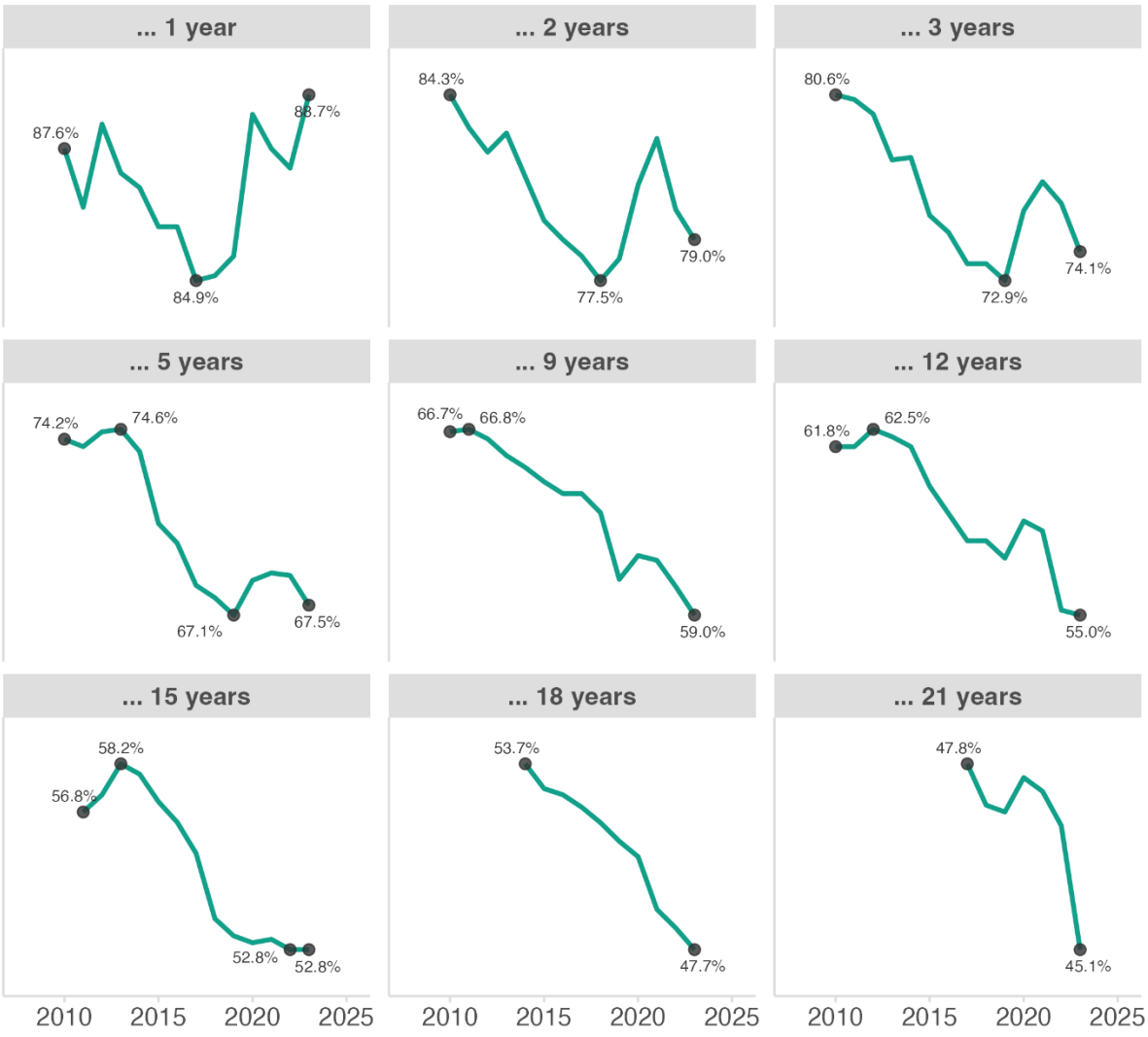
Training targets continue to be unmet while retention and quality issues remain unresolved. Teacher numbers did not keep pace with increases in line with pupil numbers prior to the pandemic and this situation has since worsened. Only 62 per cent of Postgraduate Initial Teacher Training (PGITT) targets across primary and secondary were met in 2022-23 and only 50 per cent in secondary schools. Similarly, it remains a concern that the overall attainment of graduates entering the profession is declining with 73 per cent holding a first class or 2:1 degree in 2023/24, down from 76 per cent in 2021/22. [180]

Recruitment challenges are even more acute in disadvantaged, special, and alternative schools, and subjects such as computing, design and technology, and physics. In fact, less than a fifth of the required trainees were recruited in physics, in part reflecting an increased target because of substantial shortfalls in previous years.[181] Special and alternative schools have 0.9 vacancies per 100 teachers (almost double that of all state-funded schools) and have higher rates of posts being filled on a temporary basis.[182] Recruitment efforts, especially in the North East, are likely to be further hampered after Government's market review with 68 fewer providers in the 2024-25 school year.[183]

[173] OECD, 'Education at a glance 2022', (October 2022)
[174] Luke Sibieta, 'What has happened to teacher pay in England?', (Institute for Fiscal Studies, January 2023)
[175] McLean, Worth, and Smith, 'Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report 2024', National Foundation for Educational Research, (March 2024)
[176] Department for Education, '£30,000 starting salaries proposed for teachers', (September 2019)
[177] Department for Education, 'Further education workforce', (May 2024)
[178] Department for Education, 'School workforce in England', (June 2023)
[179] Joshua Fullard and James Zuccollo, 'Local pay and teacher retention in England', (Education Policy Institute, May 2021)
[180] Department for Education, 'Initial Teacher Training Census', (December 2023)
[181] Dawson McLean et al, 'Teacher labour market in England annual report 2023', (March 2023)
[182] Department for Education, *'School workforce in England 2021/22'*, June 2022
[183] James Zuccollo, 'The reaccreditation of ITT providers: implications for STEM subjects', (Education Policy Institute, December 2022)

Issues in teacher retention are especially exacerbated in FE colleges, with one in four college teachers leaving the profession after one year compared to 15 per cent in schools in 2019. The picture is even more bleak after three years of teaching, with nearly a 50 per cent attrition rate in FE colleges compared to just over a quarter for school teachers.[184]

Figure 1.6: The proportion of teachers still in the profession after a given number of years[185]



Teachers cite concerns regarding workload and working conditions. Number of hours worked have consistently been cited as a reason for concern especially as English teachers work longer hours than those in other high-performing countries.[186] Teachers also work 4.5 more hours per week than similar graduates, though number of working hours has declined since the pandemic, but have less flexible working arrangements compared to other occupations, making teaching a less attractive option.[187] The relationship between number of hours worked and retention, however, is less than straightforward. While primary teachers work greater number of hours, their

[184] Luke Sibieta and Imran Tahir, 'What has happened to college teacher pay in England', (Institute for Fiscal Studies, March 2023)
[185] Department for Education, 'School workforce in England: reporting year 2023', (June 2024)
[186] Rebecca Allen et al., '*New Evidence on Teachers' Working Hours in England. An Empirical Analysis of Four Datasets*', (September 2019)
[187] Dawson McLean et al, *'Teacher labour market in England annual report 2023'*, (March 2023)

retention rates are better than those of secondary teachers.[188] Findings suggest that alongside improving school leadership, working conditions, and training opportunities alongside reducing hours are other important factors in overall teacher satisfaction.[189]

Early career framework and national professional qualification are a step towards a more professionalised, evidence-informed workforce. High quality CPD significantly improves pupils' learning outcomes, has the potential to close the gap between beginner and more experienced teachers, and has a greater effect on pupil attainment than several other interventions.[190] However, a large number of CPD programmes fail to produce meaningful improvements in teaching and identifying high quality CPD remains a challenge.

What should a new government do?

- **Ensure teaching is a competitive career in both schools and colleges, particularly in shortage subjects** by: extending the levelling up premium to all existing teachers, not only early-career teachers; reinstating early career payments to retain new teachers in shortage subjects; returning teachers' pay to parity with comparable professions and ensuring schools and colleges are funded to deliver that pay rise; and reviewing the pay regions and regional funding to ensure teachers' salaries are competitive with local pay.
- **Support improved retention with a focus on teacher wellbeing** including considering the role of the school accountability framework, teacher workload and flexible working arrangements.
- **Recognise the benefits of high-quality CPD** with a continued focus on improving the standards of teachers' professional development through evidence-backed programmes.

What are the parties proposing?

Teacher recruitment and retention

The Conservative Party have committed to offering a £30,000 tax-free bonus spread over five years to new teachers in priority areas and key STEM and technical subjects in a bid to attract more high-quality teachers and reduce workload for existing staff. There is evidence to suggest that financial incentives are an effective way to support teacher recruitment, particularly in disadvantaged areas[191], making this policy a welcome step towards addressing the challenges of recruitment in the sector. Clear funding for this commitment is crucial to enable this policy to be implemented in future years, as headteachers already have the ability to offer incentive payments but are subject to the funding squeeze felt by schools for the last decade.

The Labour Party say that they will recruit over 6,500 new teachers with a specific emphasis on teachers being a specialist in the subject that they are teaching, pledging £450m to do so. While

[188] Luke Sibieta, 'The teacher labour market in England', (Education Policy Institute, August 2018)
[189] Sam Sims, 'Modelling the Relationships between Teacher Working Conditions, Job Satisfaction and Workplace Mobility', (Forthcoming)
[190] James Zuccollo and Harry Fletcher-Wood, 'Evidence review: the effects of high-quality professional development on teachers and students', (Education Policy Institute, February 2020)
[191] Education Endowment Foundation, 'Teacher quality, recruitment, and retention', (June 2023)

achievable given this level of investment, this is some way short of the numbers of teachers required. In 2023/24 the government initial teacher training target for secondary teachers was just over 26,000, it achieved around half of this target.[192] It is also not clear how this recruitment drive will be achieved, or what the incentives required may be.

The Liberal Democrats have pledged to create a teacher workforce strategy to ensure every secondary school child is taught by a specialist teacher in their subject, but provide no further details of what this means in practice.

Labour have also said that all new teachers must be qualified and the Green Party have said all pupils must be taught by a qualified teacher. Currently, only 3 per cent of full-time equivalent teachers in England do not hold qualified teacher status.[193]

Teacher and teaching assistant pay

None of the parties have made any firm commitments on school teacher pay. This is despite the fact that it is particularly uncompetitive in shortage subjects and one of the levers by which recruitment issues could be addressed. The Green Party would introduce an immediate increase for those teaching in further education, recognising that the pay issues in this sector are particularly acute.

The Liberal Democrats say they will reform the School Teachers' Review body to make it fully independent of government and able to recommend fair pay rises for teachers, as well as committing to fully funding the recommended rises every year.

Teacher development and training

The Labour Party have committed to introducing an 'Excellence in Leadership' programme, a mentoring framework that expands the capacity of headteachers and leaders to improve their schools, but provide no detail on how this programme will be realised.

The Liberal Democrats have said they will introduce a funded programme of high-quality professional development for all teachers, including training on effective parental engagement. The party has committed to funding teacher training so that all trainee posts in school are paid but have not included detail on the level of trainee pay. Similarly, Labour have also committed to introducing a Teacher Training Entitlement to allow teachers to be released for training at every stage of their career, pledging £270m to be split between the Teacher Training Entitlement and their Excellence in Leadership programme. We have previously advocated for a CPD fund for teachers of the order of £600m a year.[194] While the parties' focus on developing the quality of workforce is promising, the commitments made fall short of the required investment to ensure

[192] Department for Education, 'Initial Teacher Training Census', (December 2023)
[193] Department for Education, 'School workforce in England: reporting year 2023', (June 2024)
[194] Based on costings of £80 per intervention, and two interventions per child per year, via Whitney Crenna-Jennings, Natalie Perera, and Luke Sibieta, 'Education recovery and resilience in England', (Education Policy Institute, May 2021)

that the workforce is developed to the level required to realise the positive impacts a skilled workforce can have on pupil outcomes.

The Labour Party have committed to updating the Early Career Framework, maintaining its grounding in evidence, and ensuring any teacher entering the classroom has (or is working towards) qualified teacher status. Recent school workforce data from the Department for Education has shown retention for early career teachers is at its highest since 2010 at 88.7 per cent of teachers still in service one year after qualifying, suggesting the Early Career Framework has had some success.[195] Labour's commitment to further developing the framework based on available evidence is positive, but the party's ambition for all teachers to achieve qualified teacher status does not address the challenges in developing the workforce, as 97 per cent of teachers already hold qualified teacher status.

Labour have also pledged to review the way bursaries are allocated and the structure of retention payments, but provide no detail on how this will be undertaken.

Non-teaching workforce

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have proposed a specialist mental health officer in every school, with Labour pledging £175m to achieve this. This is consistent with our recommendation on improving children's wellbeing, and represents a positive step towards addressing the state of mental health in schools, with recent data showing one in five young people suffering from mental illness.[196] Without further detail of how this policy would work in practice, it is difficult to determine the full cost. Under an assumption of each mental health worker costing around £60,000 in salary and on-costs a year, rolling out to every primary and secondary school would translate to around £1.2bn a year once fully rolled out, falling to £400m if one worker covered five primary schools.[197]

The Labour Party have said they will reinstate the School Support Staff Negotiating Body which will set the terms and conditions, training and career progression routes for support staff.

Overall assessment

Despite issues of teacher pay, recruitment, and teacher-pupil ratios all appearing in headlines over the past two years, this election has not seen the scale of these challenges meaningfully addressed in party manifestos.

The most notable omission across the manifestos are significant commitments on teacher pay. No party has pledged to improve pay rates for teachers or support staff and address the real terms pay cut that the profession has seen over the last decade, particularly for senior staff and further

[195] Department for Education, 'School workforce in England, (June 2024)
[196] Department for Education, 'Transforming children and young people's mental health provision, (May 2024)
[197] In other words, equivalent of one day a week in primary school with one worker covering broadly the same number of pupils as in one secondary school. See Annex for details of this estimate.

education teachers. Stronger commitments on pay are required to ensure teaching remains competitive in both schools and colleges.

With teacher recruitment consistently lagging behind government targets, it is also disappointing to see little detail on how new staff will be recruited into the profession. The Labour manifesto is the only manifesto to contain a concrete figure on teacher recruitment, although party's target of 6,500 remains well short of both the recent targets and the number of staff required to ensure all pupils are taught by qualified teachers, let alone specialist subject teachers. The Conservative Party, while not committing to a figure, has pledged to attract more teachers by offering £30,000 in tax-free bonuses over a five year period for new teachers in key subjects. This is a welcome commitment, as these incentives are likely to bring about short-term gains in early career teacher recruitment and make teaching a more attractive profession for younger workers and new entrants. However, it does not address the range of issues around longer-term retention beyond the five-year bonus period, nor the retention of older, more experienced staff currently in the profession.

Another issue of key importance to the health and sustainability of the workforce is addressing teacher wellbeing. Teachers frequently cite workload and working conditions as major concerns, but no party has made clear commitments on how these issues will be alleviated for staff. No party has touched upon bolstering mental health support for school staff. A package of policies to ease the working lives of teachers in this way would not only make the profession more attractive to new entrants and graduates but assist with retention in the longer term.

On a positive note, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have identified the requirement for high-quality continuing professional development to increase the quality of the workforce and the level of qualification of teachers, both of which have knock-on effects on pupil outcomes. Labour's offering of £270m for CPD for teachers and headteachers through a Teacher Training Entitlement is a good step towards creating more meaningful improvements in teacher quality. The additional focus on headteachers is particularly notable, as recent EPI research has found that effective headteachers can reduce teacher turnover and staff absenteeism in secondary schools, as well as providing benefits up to three months of learning for pupils under effective leadership.[198]

The Liberal Democrats, while less clear on their commitment, have also recognised the value of high-quality CPD and pledged to introduce a funded CPD programme, including training on parental engagement. While these CPD policies are ultimately positive, more ambitious strategies from the parties could have further benefits, namely the addressing the shortage of 'specialist' staff. Well-funded, high-quality CPD can effectively retrain and upskill staff to fill shortages as a complement to graduate recruitment.

[198] James Zuccollo, Joana Cardi Dias, Eva Jiménez, and Nils Braakmann, 'The influence of headteachers on their schools', (Education Policy Institute, October 2023)

Annex

Annex: New analysis in this report

Early years

Policy: Increasing the early years pupil premium to £1,000 per eligible child.

Analysis: "The Liberal Democrats have pledged to increase the early years pupil premium to almost triple its current level, raising it from £353 to £1,000 per year. This increase would cost approximately an additional £74.3m beyond existing spend on the early years pupil premium, based on the current number of eligible children."

Method: In 2023, the DfE recorded 114,836 children were eligible for the early years pupil premium[199], with the value of the premium set at £353.

- Current spending: (£353 x 114,836) = £40,537,108
- Proposed spending with increased premium: (£1,000 x 114,836) = £114,836,000
- Additional spending required: (£114,836,000 - £40,537,108) = £74,298,892

School organisation and outcomes

Policy: Expansion of the PE and sports premium to all secondary schools

Analysis: "If the premium was funded on the same basis for secondary schools, it would cost £86m. If instead it was funded at a similar per pupil rate (around £82 per eligible pupil) this would cost £260m."

Method: In 2023-24 the sports premium in primary schools was allocated by:

- schools with 16 or fewer eligible pupils received £1,000 per pupil; and
- schools with 17 or more eligible pupils received £16,000 and an additional payment of £10 per pupil.

The allocations covered all pupils in year 1 to year 6 (inclusive). The total allocation in 2023-24 was £325m, allocated across 3.98 million pupils.[200] This is equivalent to £82 per pupil.

In the same year, there were 3,415 state funded secondary schools that had pupils in any year group from year 7 to year 11 inclusive with a total pupil count of 3,153,914.[201] No school was below the count of 17 threshold.

Therefore:

- Allocating in the same way as the existing PE and sports premium = number of schools x £16,000 + number of pupils x £10 = £86m.

[199] Department for Education, 'Education provision: children under 5 years of age, Children registered by disadvantaged status', (June 2024)
[200] Department for Education, 'PE and sport premium 2023 to 2024 – allocations', (April 2024)
[201] Department for Education, 'Schools pupils and their characteristics: academic year 2023/24', (June 2024). Calculated from the underlying school level data.

- Allocating on the same per pupil basis = number of pupils x £82 = £260m.

Policy: Applying VAT to independent school fees resulting in a move of between 20,000 and 40,000 pupils into the state sector.

Analysis: "…fluctuations of this scale are not unusual in the state-sector. Taken with the expected fall in pupil numbers over the coming parliament, the move of pupils into the state-sector is unlikely to represent a significant challenge to the system."

Method: We compared this scale of change in pupil numbers with historic and projected changes in the pupil population in state-funded schools in England.[202] Pupil numbers and year-on-year changes are set out in the table below. As per the main body text, these are numbers at a whole system level and may not fully reflect all local circumstances.[203]

Figure 2.1: Pupil numbers (actual) and pupil projections 2009/10 to 2031/32

		Primary		Secondary	
		Pupil count	Year-on-year change	Pupil count	Year-on-year change
Actual	2009/10	3,986,370		2,864,921	
	2010/11	4,024,839	+38,469	2,838,562	-26,359
	2011/12	4,102,024	+77,185	2,810,708	-27,854
	2012/13	4,197,119	+95,095	2,780,196	-30,512
	2013/14	4,304,751	+107,632	2,741,140	-39,056
	2014/15	4,400,019	+95,268	2,740,443	-697
	2015/16	4,504,331	+104,312	2,757,911	+17,468
	2016/17	4,583,431	+79,100	2,796,764	+38,853
	2017/18	4,635,145	+51,714	2,848,856	+52,092
	2018/19	4,652,125	+16,980	2,923,810	+74,954
	2019/20	4,647,225	-4,900	3,003,233	+79,423
	2020/21	4,600,246	-46,979	3,062,058	+58,825
	2021/22	4,597,370	-2,876	3,125,863	+63,805
	2022/23	4,593,497	-3,873	3,193,260	+67,397
Projection	2023/24	4,537,659	-55,838	3,244,230	+50,970
	2024/25	4,430,626	-107,033	3,244,067	-163
	2025/26	4,349,689	-80,937	3,238,084	-5,983
	2026/27	4,271,348	-78,341	3,219,189	-18,895
	2027/28	4,180,930	-90,418	3,191,441	-27,748
	2028/29	4,112,491	-68,439	3,145,772	-45,669
	2029/30	4,068,482	-44,009	3,094,576	-51,196
	2030/31	4,032,503	-35,979	3,044,146	-50,430

[202] Department for Education, 'National pupil projections: reporting year 2023', (October 2023)
[203] For local authority level estimates of changes in pupil numbers see Robbie Cruikshanks, 'School funding model: Effect of falling school rolls', (April 2024)

2031/32	4,014,874	-17,629	2,975,475	-68,671

Post-16 and higher education

Policy: Under the Lifetime Skills Grant, the Liberal Democrats propose giving every adult £5,000 to spend on education and training throughout their life.

Analysis: "Assuming…that an individual will receive the grant at the age of 18, the policy will have an ongoing £3.9bn per cohort by 2022 population estimates."

Method: Based on ONS population estimates, we sum the number of female and male 18-year-olds in the UK in 2022 and multiple the result by £5,000. This estimate provides the upper bound for the cost of the policy.

- (375,375 + 399,637) x 5,000 = £3,875,060,000.00

School and college funding

Policy: No commitment to making real terms increases to the value of the pupil premium for disadvantaged pupils in primary and secondary schools.

Analysis: "Based on pupil numbers in 2024-25, reversing these [real terms] cuts to the pupil premium would cost around £400 million."

Method: The value of the pupil premium in each year from 2011-12 to 2024-25 is set out in the table below. We have then calculated what the value of the premium from 2014-15 onward would have been if it had kept its value in real terms (based on the GDP deflator).

Figure 2.2: Value of the deprivation element of the pupil premium actual (cash value) and if it had been maintained in real terms from 2014-15 onwards[204, 205, 206]

	Cash value			Value if it maintained its value from 2014-15 in real terms	
Year	Primary	Secondary	GDP Deflator	Primary	Secondary
2011-12	£488	£488	0.78	£1,237	£890
2012-13	£623	£623	0.79	£1,260	£906
2013-14	£953	£900	0.81	£1,284	£924
2014-15	£1,300	£935	0.82	£1,300	£935
2015-16	£1,320	£935	0.83	£1,309	£942
2016-17	£1,320	£935	0.84	£1,339	£963
2017-18	£1,320	£935	0.86	£1,360	£978
2018-19	£1,320	£935	0.88	£1,389	£999
2019-20	£1,320	£935	0.90	£1,422	£1,022
2020-21	£1,345	£955	0.94	£1,499	£1,078
2021-22	£1,345	£955	0.94	£1,487	£1,069
2022-23	£1,385	£985	1.00	£1,587	£1,141
2023-24	£1,455	£1,035	1.07	£1,691	£1,216
2024-25	£1,480	£1,050	1.07	£1,704	£1,226

We combine these differences in rates with the number of pupils eligible for the pupil premium in 2024-25[207] to estimate how much it would cost to return the value of the pupil premium in real terms to the value in 2014-15.

Figure 3.3: Value of the deprivation element of the pupil premium actual (cash value) and if it had been maintained in real terms from 2014-15 onwards

	Pupils (a)	Pupil premium 2024-25 (b)	Pupil premium 2024-25 if maintained in real terms (c)	Shortfall in value of premium (d) = (c) - (b)	Shortfall in allocation (a) x (d) (million)
Primary	1,111,132	£1,480	£1,704	£224	£249
Secondary	890,021	£1,050	£1,226	£176	£156
				Total	**£406**

[204] House of Commons, 'Research briefing: the pupil premium (England)', (September 2023)
[205] Department for Education, 'Pupil premium 2024 to 2025: technical note', (May 2024)
[206] HM Treasury, 'GDP deflators at market prices, and money GDP', (April 2024)
[207] Department for Education, 'Pupil premium: allocations and conditions of grant 2024 to 2025', (May 2024)

Education workforce

Policy: A specialist mental health officer in every school.

Analysis: "… rolling out to every primary and secondary school would translate to around £1.2bn a year once fully rolled out, falling to £400 million if one worker covered five primary schools.."

Method: As per the body text this is not something that can be easily costed without further detail of how the proposal would work in practice – for example, the type of support being offered, how it would be fully rolled out, and whether each person would be based full-time in a school.

We have therefore not fully costed this policy and there would be a great deal of uncertainty in any cost that we put forward at this stage. In January 2024 there were 16,764 state-funded primary schools and 3,452 state-funded secondary schools in England.[208]

Therefore, under an assumption of each mental health worker costing around £60,000 in salary and on-costs a year, rolling out to every primary and secondary school would translate to around £1.2bn a year once fully rolled out.

If instead, you placed one mental health worker in every secondary school and a mental health worker was shared between five primary schools (equivalent to being in once a week and on average, around the same number of pupils as one secondary school), it would cost approximately £400 million.

[208] Department for Education, 'Schools pupils and their characteristics: academic year 2023/24', (June 2024).

EDUCATION POLICY INSTITUTE

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The education system in England faces many challenges in the years ahead.

In this report we provide an independent, evidence-based assessment of the extent to which each of the main political parties have committed to meeting those challenges in the run up to the 2024 general election.