

## **Children's Commissioner's Proposals to unlock potential and narrow the disadvantage gap – schools and colleges are at the heart of helping children recover from the pandemic**

*Engage, support, achieve - the Children's Commissioner's Office (CCO) has come up with a series of policies to help children to catch-up*

### **What children said about schools**

This generation like school. As one child said: 'People don't realise how much education is important for life in general. [...] if they don't learn in school, they might not be able to enjoy life to the fullest' – *Girl, 14*. Just 16% said they are unhappy with their life at school or college, and only one in ten are unhappy with their progress.

The impact of the pandemic has taught us how vital schools, and the people who work in them, are. Children missed their friends, they missed their teachers, they missed activities, and they missed real classroom learning. As one child said: 'lockdown really stops children because they can't do that much stuff we love and it makes them go all shaky like they can't study the normal day and if they need to achieve a job they want to do it will be hard for them to pass the exams' – *Girl, 9*.

Keeping schools open for the most vulnerable children has highlighted their role not only in supporting children but for safeguarding. Vulnerable children spoke of how much they needed high quality support: 'My reading and spelling is not very good. All the words get muddled up and I need more help in class' – *Boy, 10*. They are even more likely than their peers to say education was important to their future plans. We must prioritise that cohort in particular as we plan our recovery.

It is also a generation that understands that school will always be challenging in some way, but still prizes education as a life priority. As a child said: 'I really want to learn even if it's hard because education is important to me' – *Girl, 11*, 'Bad education stops some children from being able to achieve something great in life but I am lucky because I have a great education' – *Boy, 12*.

A theme developed was the importance of less academic, more pragmatic experiences. 'I was very keen on starting business studies at my school, but they took down the subject just before I started year 9' – *Girl, 15*. And, a number of responses asked for vocational support: 'Promote more vocational jobs in school' – *Boy, 17*.

Overall, pupils clearly love their teachers, and the vast majority find schools nurturing and supportive. Children do not want a culture of spoon-feeding or 'learned helplessness,' in which they do not have to think.

### **What this means for policy now as we come out of lockdown**

The pandemic has taught us just how vital schools, and the people who work in them, are. They are the place where children learn, where they make friends, where they find things they are passionate about and talented at. A place that is safe, with adults around them who care about their lives and that provides routine, structure, and discipline. That we kept schools open for the most vulnerable children has highlighted their role not only in supporting to children to succeed but as a key part of any safeguarding strategy. We must prioritise that cohort in particular as we plan our recovery. This requires an urgent focus on ensuring these children are back in school and supported to be ready to learn.

- 1) An urgent focus on improved services to children struggling with attendance, emotional problems, and other common consequences of the pandemic.**

- 2) **A comprehensive 3 year ‘catch-up’ package building on the investment already committed.**
- 3) **Prioritise faster implementation of tutoring support, and for schools where that is not possible, consider a direct grant in lieu.**
- 4) **A voluntary third session in the school day, for catch-up support and activities.**
- 5) **A cradle-to-career approach to securing viable pathways for all school leavers.**

### **The policies we think will benefit children now**

- 1) **An urgent focus on improved services to children struggling with attendance, emotional problems, and other common consequences of the pandemic.**

There is a group of children for whom even the best teacher will not be enough to support a child. It might be a safeguarding issue, where support from children’s services is required to help keep them safe, or that they need the support of a speech and language therapist, or a mental health need that requires specialist support. There are those who don’t attend regularly, or at all, so don’t benefit from all the advantages school gives you, educationally, socially and in wellbeing terms. As such, we propose:

- a. **Increasing access to targeted pastoral and family support** – we know that many children, and many families, have faced significant hardships during the pandemic. Whilst our children have admirable resilience and many will be able to return to school normally, some will require additional support to return to normality. We should prioritise bolstering and increasing capacity of schools to provide pastoral interventions to children who need them, and to provide family support work where this is a barrier. These interventions should be targeted at raising school attendance and improving behaviour. We know that there has been a significant increase in persistent absence in the 2020-21 academic year, and if we do not seize the opportunity to address this then many children will simply not return to regular learning. Similarly, some children have fallen out of the habits of good behaviour because of school closures and will need extra support to regain them. We should roll out the SAFE Taskforces across the country, using the learning from the hotspot areas to inform best practice, and use attendance as a key outcome metric for all professionals working with children.
- b. **National investment in digital counselling** – as proposed in our health policy paper.
- c. **Faster roll out of mental health support in schools** – as proposed in our health policy paper.
- d. **Prioritise disadvantaged children in school admissions.** Looked After Children and children with an EHCP are already prioritised in school admissions. This should be immediately expanded to include Children in Need – those children who receive support from a social worker via their local authority – and those who are in receipt of the pupil premium.
- e. **Deliver Virtual School Heads nationally.** Given the success of the Virtual School Head role for Looked after Children, and the successful pilot of the extension to Children in Need, we should now deliver that nationally.

- 2) **A comprehensive ‘catch-up’ package.** Over the last fifteen years, we have reformed and revolutionised the experiences of children in England’s schools. And we have improved the quality of teaching, fostered the best talent in the classroom and allowed teachers to prove innovative approaches work in improving outcomes. The priority has been ensuring that, regardless of the hand you are dealt, you can go to a great school that will help you attain and

achieve. We have focussed relentlessly on making sure that those who are from disadvantaged communities are prioritised. Between 2010 and 2019 the disadvantage gap at KS4 narrowed by 9%, while the UK's position in the international PISA rankings has increased across all subjects. In short, children who would once have been held back, have been supported to succeed. We must now increase investment in schools in real terms and invest further in an enhanced comprehensive catch-up package to make sure no child is further disadvantaged.

- a. **Link the pupil premium to the rate of inflation** – the pupil premium directs government funding to schools serving children who are most likely to be disadvantaged in their education. It has played a significant and successful part in narrowing the attainment gap. To prevent its impact being dulled over time, we should now link it to the inflation rate so that its real value is not eroded. Given the success of the pupil premium plus for looked after children, the link to inflation should be mirrored here, alongside rolling out the pilot of the PP+ post-16 nationally.
- b. **Double incentive payments given to teachers to work in 'challenging areas'** – increase to £2,000 per year and focus them on the poorest 20-25% of schools. These payments should be eligible to all early maths science and language teachers in these schools.. The payment is currently made to those teaching in certain eligible local authorities and misses schools outside of those local authorities but with high proportions of poorer pupils. It also does not extend to science teachers more widely or to language teachers.
- c. **Permit a small minority of pupils to repeat a year** – for example if they had lost significant in person learning time due to shielding and were in Key Stage 4.

3) **Prioritise faster implementation of tutoring support, and for schools where that is not possible, consider a direct grant in lieu.**

We are pleased that tutoring, an effective and proven intervention, has been made available to children to help accelerate their catch-up. To continue this support we propose:

- a. **Committing to funding tutoring for the next three years** – ensuring that we stabilise the delivery of this system and allowing recruitment and training infrastructure to be bolstered in areas of the country where this isn't currently in place.
- b. **Incentivising take-up of tutoring** – particularly amongst children who have fallen furthest behind national expectations and amongst vulnerable groups and set the expectation that Children in Need and those with an EHCP will undertake at least one cycle of tutoring.
- c. **A more flexible approach may be needed in order to reach as many children as possible** – there may be instances where a grant in lieu is provided directly to families of schools, where tutoring provision can be provided locally.

4) **A voluntary third session in the school day, for catch-up support and activities.**

Children told us that not only did they miss learning and their friends when schools closed during the pandemic, they also missed out on fun, enrichment activities – they want to kick a ball around, learn instruments, stage plays, sing in choirs and be part of a team. Evidence from the EEF indicates that additional time in the school day can lead to attainment gains of up to 2 months (and nearly 3 months for disadvantaged pupils) as well as improved attendance, behaviour and relationships with peers. Programmes which provide stimulating environments and activities or develop additional personal and social skills are more likely to have an impact on attainment than those that are solely academic.

As we recover, children want more time in school, not less, and this time should be spent on academic catch up too, particularly for those children who have fallen behind. As such, an expanded out-of-school offer should be the norm, especially in disadvantaged areas. Children have missed out on much more than their lessons during the pandemic. They need opportunities to catch up on missed social, sporting and cultural experiences too. Those

children who lack a quiet space to study at home, or a parent who can help with schoolwork, would benefit from this provision in school. Further funding should also be available for holiday activities and breakfast clubs as proposed within our community policy paper.

**5) A cradle-to-career approach to securing viable pathways for all school leavers.**

- a. **Investment in family support in the Early Years** – as set out in our health and families papers
- b. **As proposed by the Education Policy Institute increased funding for the Early Years pupil premium** – bringing it up to the same rate as primary aged pupils (and targeted funding to raise the quality of early years education for young children.
- c. **A focus on careers** (as set out in our careers policy paper) and a package of measures to improve 16-19 education as recommended by the Education Policy Institute.