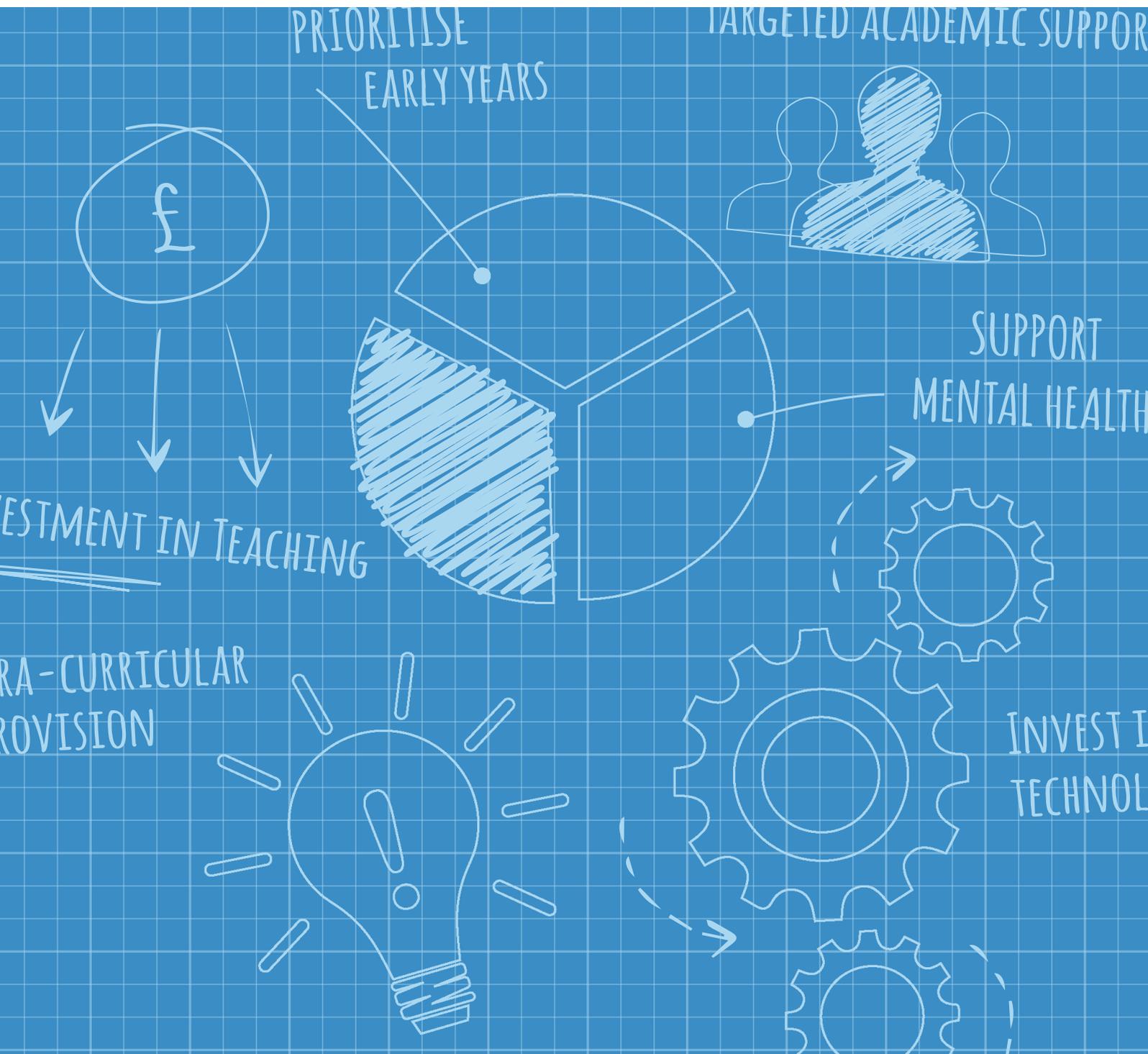


# EDUCATION RECOVERY

MAY 2021

A blueprint for a stronger and fairer system for all





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## **About NAHT**

We represent more than 32,500 school leaders in early years, primary, secondary and special schools, making us the largest association for school leaders in the UK. With school leaders in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, we use our voice at the highest levels of government to influence policy for the benefit of leaders and learners everywhere. Our NAHT Edge membership supports, develops and represents middle leaders in schools.



# Introduction

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## Introduction by NAHT general secretary, Paul Whiteman

It is hard to overstate the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on school communities. Since the early months of 2020, school leaders and their teams have had to deal with a set of challenges, the likes of which no one could have anticipated.

During that time, I, along with other members of the NAHT team, have been privileged to speak with thousands of school leaders across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Through those conversations, I have heard first-hand the lengths schools have gone to in order to protect and care for pupils in the most unimaginably challenging of times. From the very start of the crisis, school staff looked after the most vulnerable pupils as the country went into lockdown; they went to extraordinary lengths to keep children fed and safe and effectively reimaged the very concept of 'school' as they worked to implement a remote learning offer.

There is no doubt in my mind that this vital work helped to shield large numbers of children from the worst effects of the pandemic.

Despite the incredible efforts of school staff, covid-19 has undoubtedly had an impact on children and young people. Early research has suggested that pupils in England experienced losses of up to two months in reading (in primary and secondary schools), and up to three months in maths (in primary schools) by the first half of the autumn term 2020. While we should be careful not to draw firm conclusions from these early, tentative findings, it is self-evident that learning has been disrupted as a result of the pandemic.

Earlier this year, the government appointed Sir Kevan Collins as its 'education recovery commissioner' and announced he would publish a series of recommendations later in the summer term. Since Sir Kevan's appointment, many of the conversations we have had with school leaders

have focused on what his report might, and indeed *should*, include. This short report draws heavily on those conversations.

It is important to remember that while the government has been deliberating, school staff have already been quietly, but determinedly, getting on with the crucial task of supporting pupils. In fact, this work never stopped. Since all pupils have returned to school in person, teachers have been busy identifying the additional support they need and putting that in place. They have not waited for the government to catch up.

As many leaders have pointed out to me, one of the best strategies for educational recovery is to allow schools to continue to do what they have always done: provide a well-taught, broad and balanced curriculum; support pupils' personal, social and emotional development and provide additional support to those that need it. That is why *building on the excellent work already taking place in schools* is one of the key principles underpinning this report. However, we have also set out a number of areas where we think the government has an opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of young people, both in the short and long term.

Our ideas are unapologetically ambitious; they will also require significant investment. If the government genuinely wants to take this opportunity to improve the life chances of all children, now is the moment to be bold. The question that the government now needs to answer is: just how ambitious are they prepared to be?

# Principles

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NAHT's blueprint for educational recovery is underpinned by the following core principles:

- **The need for investment**

A truly ambitious educational recovery plan for this country will require a significant, multi-year investment that at least matches the scale of investment already seen in other parts of the world on a per-pupil basis.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, any funding must be **in addition** to the designated schools grant. Recovery funding should not be used to mask or offset inadequacies in the funding schools currently receive.

- **An evidence-based approach**

Decisions about what strategies to include in any national recovery plan should be evidence-based, not driven by political ideology. There is a myriad of proposals that could be included, but we must focus on those most likely to have the biggest impact on pupils' outcomes.

- **Trust and empower teachers and school leaders**

While the plan should draw on the best available evidence to identify overarching areas for investment and focus, schools and individual teachers must retain freedom and autonomy to make decisions at a school and classroom level based on their experience and unique knowledge of the pupils they work with. A one-size-fits-all approach for all schools will not work.

*The recovery plan should recognise that children and young people have not all been affected in the same way.*

- **Build on existing good practice**

We should recognise and build upon the excellent work that already takes place in schools, rather than simply imposing a myriad of new top-down strategies and initiatives.

- **The need for genuine ambition**

We should not aim to return to where we were before the pandemic. Returning the attainment gap to 'pre-pandemic levels' should not be the height of our ambitions. We should not accept pre-existing educational inequity as inevitable or acceptable.

- **The importance of developing a resilient plan**

Any plan must be flexible and resilient enough to withstand further disruption to education. While the hope is that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, we do not know how the future will play out or the scale of local or national disruption to education that we could see in the coming months.

- **Tailored support to meet individual needs**

The recovery plan should recognise that while children and young people have been affected by the pandemic, they have not all been affected in the same way, and headline figures mask a wide variety of individual experiences and circumstances. The *type* of support pupils need will differ significantly depending on their age and the stage of education they are currently at. For example, a child in year one with over a decade of schooling ahead of them will likely need a very different kind of support to a pupil

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<sup>1</sup> As an example, the US government has recently announced a \$122 billion plan for its schools. The Sutton Trust suggests that an equivalent per head rate in England would amount to £15.5 billion.

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in year 11 about to sit their GCSEs. Scope for a differentiated approach that takes into account the age and needs of every child is essential. We need to be mindful that attempts to rush or ‘cram’ could end up being counter-productive, particularly for younger pupils.

- **School capacity**

There is a finite capacity in any school. If schools are to be asked to adopt new strategies then there are only two options: to add extra resources to the school or to identify what schools can stop doing to increase capacity. Simply piling up new initiatives and expectations is not a realistic or sustainable option.

- **In-built longevity**

The strategies and initiatives included in the plan should have in-built longevity. There is a long history of government-led short-term initiatives, including previous experiments with extended school days and one-to-one tutoring. To achieve buy-in from the profession there must be a long-term, sustainable commitment to any new schemes.

- **Trade-offs and unintended consequences**

The government must be mindful of trade-offs and unintended consequences of any idea being proposed. For example, the marginal gains that might be possible through extending the school day must be weighed against the costs of such a strategy, including the impact on pupils’ mental health, reduced family time, the wellbeing of staff, and less time for extra-curricular activities.

*There is a finite capacity in any school... simply piling up new initiatives and expectations is not a realistic or sustainable option.*

- **An entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum**

Pupils should continue to be entitled to a broad and balanced curriculum, and any recovery plan must not encourage a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on ‘core’ subjects alone.

- **Avoiding labels and unhelpful catastrophising**

A careful balance must be struck between understanding and dealing with the impact of educational disruption, while not overgeneralising or unnecessarily catastrophising the situation pupils face. We should be acutely aware of the language being used to describe the impact of the pandemic on children and young people. Talk of a ‘lost generation’ is deeply unhelpful, and disrespectful to pupils.

- **An inclusive plan that works for all pupils**

Any plan developed by the government must take account of, and be relevant to *all* pupils, including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

# The seven pillars of educational recovery

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A truly ambitious educational recovery plan should focus on a number of key areas, all aimed at improving outcomes for children and young people. NAHT has identified seven key pillars upon which an educational recovery plan should be built:

## Prioritise the early years

A child's early formative experience can have a lasting impact<sup>2,3,4</sup>. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has noted, "The first five years of children's lives are crucial to their development. During this period, children learn at a faster rate than at any other time in their lives, developing basic cognitive and socio-emotional skills that are fundamental for their future achievements in school and later on as an adult."<sup>5</sup>

As a result of the pandemic, many young children will have missed out on crucial early experiences linked to social and emotional development. For many, there have been reduced opportunities to play, interact and socialise with other children and early years professionals. The Sutton Trust has found that 52% of parents of children aged between two and four felt their child's social and emotional development had been negatively affected as a result of covid-19.<sup>6</sup> School leaders have told us that they have already seen the impact of multiple lockdowns on some of the youngest children in their schools and nurseries.

**“Many young children will have missed out on crucial early experiences linked to social and emotional development.”**

The government must therefore place investment in the early years at the heart of its educational recovery plan.

One specific early years policy that should be urgently reviewed is the 30 hours 'funded childcare' for working parents. The current policy means that only children of parents currently in work benefit from the funded hours in an early years setting. This means that some of the most disadvantaged children are potentially missing out. The policy needs to be recast so that it is focused on providing equal access to high-quality early education for all children. The government must also revisit the funding that early years providers currently receive to deliver the 30 hours offer, as current levels remain insufficient.

Furthermore, the government should increase the early years pupil premium to achieve parity with the primary pupil premium so that early intervention can be prioritised.

NAHT agrees with calls from The Sutton Trust that funding should be provided for continuous professional development (CPD) of the early years workforce.<sup>7</sup> High-quality CPD should be an entitlement for all early years professionals.

However, a truly ambitious plan must go further, providing support and services for children and families beyond education. The widespread closure of children's centres witnessed between 2010 and 2019 was a grave error, particularly in light of recent research showing the positive impact such centres had on children's health<sup>8</sup>. Now is the time to invest in and rapidly expand multi-disciplinary children's centres. The government's recent proposals for a "Start for Life" package and "Family Hubs" could be the way to address this, and it is essential these are now launched and properly resourced. The government must also take this opportunity to secure the long-

**“Schools need to be properly funded so they can enhance and expand their contribution to promoting good mental health and well-being amongst pupils of all ages.”**

term future of maintained nursery schools, given the crucial role they play in the sector and the successful outcomes they already achieve, particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEND.

### Improve support for mental health and well-being

Schools already play a significant role in supporting the mental health and well-being of their pupils. Emerging evidence suggests that the demands on this provision have already increased significantly<sup>9</sup>.

Schools need to be properly funded so they can enhance and expand their contribution to promoting good mental health and well-being amongst pupils of all ages, identifying any emerging mental health needs and referring those pupils on to health professionals for support and treatment where appropriate.

However, we need to be very clear that the role of school staff is not the diagnosis of mental health needs, nor the delivery of treatment or therapeutic support.

The pandemic has exposed the lack of ambition in the government’s current plans to improve mental health provision for school-aged children. The original plan to have mental health support teams covering 20-25% of the country by 2023/24 did not go far, or fast enough. While an additional £79m has since been allocated to the scheme, the rollout still needs to be far quicker. The government must accelerate the urgent improvements and resourcing required for mental health services throughout the country so that specialist support can be accessed as soon as pupils need it.

Quite rightly, there has been a great deal of focus on the mental health and well-being of pupils during the pandemic, but we need to recognise and pay attention to the well-being of school staff too. There were already serious concerns about the well-being of teachers and school leaders before the pandemic, and there is strong evidence to suggest that the pandemic has only exacerbated this pre-existing issue.<sup>10,11</sup> The quality of teaching is a crucial factor in addressing attainment gaps, and if we want teachers and leaders to be at their best, we cannot continue to only pay lip service to the issue of their well-being. The government has begun to recognise the scale of this issue and the recently published wellbeing charter represents some tentative first steps in trying to deal with the issue, but there is an urgent need to be much bolder. The well-being and mental health of school staff must be placed at the heart of the recovery process, and the government must be prepared to look again at some of the fundamental problems driving excessive teacher workload.

### Invest in the teaching profession

An overview of evidence produced by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) in 2020 suggests that high-quality CPD has a greater effect on pupil attainment than many other school-based interventions, including performance-related pay and lengthening the school day.<sup>12</sup> As such, teacher development should sit at the heart of an ambitious recovery plan. Investment in the teaching profession is one way to ensure that longevity and sustainability are ‘baked-in’ to the plan. Such investment would not just benefit this generation of children, but future generations too.

A key recommendation in our 2020 report, ‘Improving Schools’ was that there should be a national commitment to a minimum CPD entitlement that is properly funded.<sup>13</sup> Now is the time to ensure that all teachers have access to high-quality professional development based on their individual needs. Crucially, there must be freedom to choose the CPD that is right for individual teachers and schools.

The government also needs to ensure that any new teacher that has entered the profession during the pandemic has the necessary support to compensate for the disruption they would have experienced during their training. At the very least, this should include funded, additional, and ongoing support from a suitably trained mentor.

We also know that the quality of leadership is an important factor in driving school improvement and improving pupil outcomes<sup>14, 15, 16, 17</sup>. An ambitious recovery package should ensure that all new school leaders receive an entitlement to high-quality mentoring support and that more experienced leaders can access ongoing professional development tailored to their role. We should also not underestimate the importance of locally run, networks of school leaders working together to drive improvements across a geographical region.

### Provide targeted academic support for pupils who need it

Any child who needs additional academic support following the pandemic should be able to access high-quality, targeted intervention.

The available evidence suggests that, if implemented well, one-to-one and small group tuition can have a positive impact on attainment.<sup>18</sup> As such, tutoring is understood to be one of our 'best bets' when it comes to helping pupils who have fallen behind in their learning.

However, at present, too few pupils are able to benefit from high-quality tutoring and the target **to expand tutoring support** in 2021/22 is not ambitious enough. The government's plan for 524,000 pupils to receive tutoring next year still represents a relatively small proportion of the total school population and should be seen in the context of 2.03million pupils being eligible for some form of pupil premium funding in 2020-21.<sup>19</sup> **Meeting this need will require** a significant increase in government investment in tutoring but also a new flexible approach to scale up tutoring provision rapidly across all parts of the country. Alongside existing tutoring programmes, schools should therefore be funded to appoint

*Our ambition for pupils must be so much greater than returning to the pre-pandemic status quo.*

and deploy tutors themselves rather than rely on external providers, to meet their particular needs and contexts.

The government should also rethink its plans to taper subsidies for tuition. Based on current plans, schools could be expected to pay 90% of the cost of tutoring sessions by 2023-24. As a result, schools could find that they simply cannot afford to continue paying for tutoring, putting the sustainability of the programme at risk.

It should also be remembered that there is a range of other evidence-based interventions that schools already use effectively to support pupils. While the National Tutoring Programme may be one effective way to support pupils, we should not see it as the only solution. The government should continue to look closely at other interventions that have proven effective and support these too. Schools themselves need to have the resources to continue, and potentially expand, interventions that have been proven to work in their context.

Crucially, the aim of such interventions, including the National Tutoring Programme, should not be to return to pre-pandemic levels but to go much further in tackling the long-standing attainment gap that has existed for decades. Our ambition for pupils must be so much greater than returning to the pre-pandemic status quo.

### Expand extra-curricular provision and invest in extra-curricular providers

During the pandemic, children and young people have missed out on a range of formal and informal extra-curricular activities. These play a vital role in enriching children's lives and support their personal development and mental well-being. The government should therefore look to harness and expand the work of existing extra-curricular

providers, investing in community facilities and resources so that all children have access to a wide range of funded activities. There is also an opportunity to rebuild and expand youth services, many of which have disappeared in recent years.

Crucially, this is not about simply adding more hours to the school day but increasing access to a wider range of extra-curricular activities and opportunities including during evenings, weekends and school holidays. This should include exploring ways to ensure children and young people have the necessary equipment to access the full range of extra-curricular activities available.

### Invest in school technology

The pandemic has accelerated the pace of change when it comes to the use of technology to support learning in schools. There is little doubt that technology will continue to play an important part in education going forward.

This does not mean that schools will continue to use technology in the same way as they have been forced to do during the pandemic, but there is an opportunity to build on the best aspects of the work that has taken place in the last fourteen months. For example, there is an opportunity to repurpose and improve the online videos and resources created during the pandemic, including those produced by the government-backed Oak Academy, to support homework and home learning on an ongoing basis. Not only could such resources help parents to support their children, but there may also be opportunities to improve alignment with in-class teaching, and to further improve the quality of feedback pupils receive. This could also have the added benefit of reducing teacher workload, linking to our second pillar.

**“The government must ensure that every child has access to an internet-connected device that allows them to engage with and complete [set] work.”**

As a bare minimum, the government must ensure that every child has access to an internet-connected device that allows them to engage with and complete work set by their school, with the necessary data allowances.

Once again, there is the question of ambition here. For years teachers have had to manage outdated and ageing technology. Many schools have struggled with slow or unreliable broadband and wireless. If we are about to enter a new era in ‘Edtech’ and online learning, the government must ensure that schools have the technology that is up to the job. Without a clear plan, there is a real danger we could be left behind as other nations forge ahead.

### Remove unnecessary burdens and distractions

Most school communities have undergone an enormous shock as a result of the pandemic. The effects of that shock continue to be felt, and it is clear that the disruption to education is far from over.

As we move into a new school year, schools must be freed from unnecessary distractions and burdens so that they can continue to meet the relentless challenges of the pandemic and focus on providing the vital support that pupils need.

It would be a mistake to rush to simply reimpose the accountability system that existed prior to covid-19. To do so would potentially hamper the work of schools at this crucial time, and act as an unnecessary and unhelpful distraction. NAHT supports the Education Policy Institute’s (EPI’s) recent recommendation that “Ofsted should refrain from a “business as usual approach” in 2021-22. It is our view that the education inspection framework (EIF) should remain suspended.

We recognise that there might be a need for an alternative role for Ofsted during 2021-22, but this should be primarily focused on supporting schools with educational recovery and involve identifying and sharing best practice as schools recover from the disruption caused by the pandemic. We accept that Ofsted would need

*It would be a mistake to rush to simply reimpose the accountability system that existed prior to covid-19.*

to continue to have the option of inspecting schools where serious concerns have been raised, especially if this relates to issues such as safeguarding.

Few would argue that there should be no system of accountability for schools, but the pause in routine Ofsted inspections that has occurred during the pandemic provides a rare and unique opportunity to ask some fundamental questions about the sort of system that we should have. NAHT's own Accountability Commission concluded that the current approach to accountability is doing more harm than good and offers a range of alternative solutions.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the pause in primary statutory assessment offers an opportunity to reflect on

whether the current system is truly fit for purpose and in the best interests of pupils. NAHT has long argued that there should be fewer statutory assessments during a child's time in primary school.<sup>21</sup> As things currently stand, in 2021-22 there are due to be six distinct statutory assessments taking place in primary schools. This is simply too many and it is hard to see how this volume of statutory assessments will help the recovery process next year, or beyond.

At secondary level, the delays in decisions regarding adaptations to assessments; late notice of contingency plans and significant additional workload for staff in schools caused by the cancellation of exams in both 2020 and 2021 cannot continue into the next academic year. Secondary school staff must have clarity about exam arrangements and contingencies for 2022 before the start of the academic year.

As others have already pointed out, it would be ill-advised to reimpose performance tables in 2021-22<sup>22</sup> and NAHT believes these should remain suspended.

# Looking beyond the school gates

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We live in one of the wealthiest countries in the world and yet the evidence suggests that the number of children living in poverty in the UK is due to reach five million this year.<sup>23</sup> Some have estimated that this represents nine children in every class of thirty.<sup>24</sup> Not only should this be a source of national shame, but it clearly hinders any efforts to tackle educational inequality.

*“Until we commit to tackling and ending child poverty, schools will always be working with one hand tied behind their backs.”*

Schools do not exist in a vacuum and school staff see first-hand the effects of child poverty on a daily basis. Until we commit to tackling and ending child poverty in this country, schools will always be working with one hand tied behind their backs. It doesn't matter how effective an academic intervention is if a child is too hungry or tired to concentrate.

While tackling this issue may not be within the immediate scope of the government's educational recovery plan itself, it cannot be ignored either. If the government is truly committed to an ambitious, transformative plan which gives every child the best possible start in life, then it must look beyond the school gates and be prepared to address such fundamental and underlying issues. The question is, as posed at the outset of this report, how ambitious are we prepared to be?

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