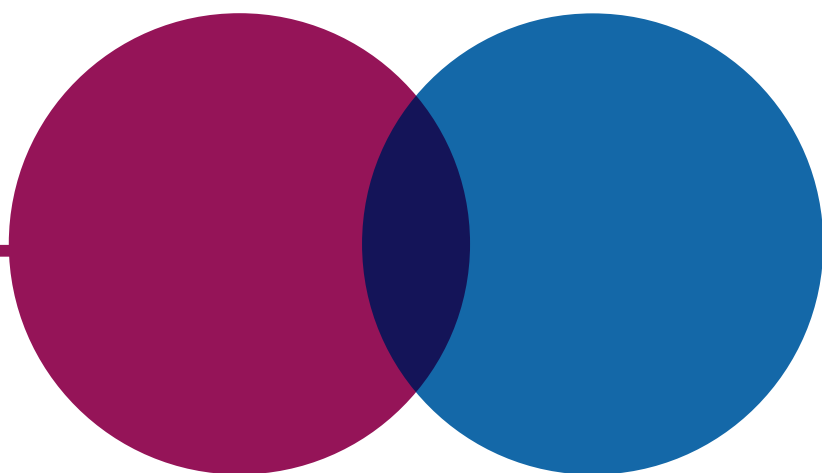




National Audit Office



REPORT

Education recovery in schools in England

Department for Education

SESSION 2022-23
1 FEBRUARY 2023
HC 1081

Key facts

£3.5bn

funding announced for education recovery in schools by the Department for Education (DfE) covering 2020/21 to 2023/24

2.5mn

number of courses started under the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) across 2020/21 and 2021/22

**2.2, 0.9
and 1.2
months**

estimated average amount in summer 2021 by which pupils were behind the level of attainment that would have been expected in primary maths, primary reading and secondary reading respectively, compared with 3.6, 1.8 and 1.5 months in autumn 2020

87%	proportion of schools that participated in some form of tutoring under the NTP in 2021/22
1.3 million	number of pupils (one in five) who received school-led tutoring in 2021/22
45%	percentage achievement against DfE’s target for the number of courses started under the NTP tuition partners scheme in 2021/22
81%	proportion of NTP courses started in 2021/22 accounted for by the school-led tutoring scheme
47%	proportion of the pupils who received school-led tutoring in 2021/22 who were disadvantaged
3.23	the disadvantage gap index (a measure of the difference in attainment between disadvantaged and other pupils) at the end of primary school in 2022, compared with 2.91 in 2019

Throughout this report, central government financial years are written as, for example, ‘2021-22’ and run from 1 April to 31 March; school academic years are written ‘2021/22’ and run from 1 September to 31 August.

‘Disadvantaged pupils’ are those who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the past six years, and may also include children who have ever been looked after by their local authority.

Summary

1 In January 2022, there were 21,600 state schools in England, educating 8.3 million pupils. Around 11,800 of these schools (55% of the total), with 3.6 million pupils, were maintained schools, funded and overseen by local authorities. The remaining 9,800 schools (45%) were academies, with 4.7 million pupils. Each academy school is part of an academy trust, directly funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and independent of the relevant local authority. DfE is responsible for the school system in England and is ultimately accountable for securing value for money from the funding provided for schools.

2 To help limit transmission of the COVID-19 virus, schools were closed to pupils other than vulnerable children and children of critical workers from March to July 2020 and again from January to March 2021. During these periods, education for most children took place remotely at home. Even when schools were open during the pandemic, pupils' learning was disrupted, with restrictions on activities and more children, teachers and other staff absent than usual.

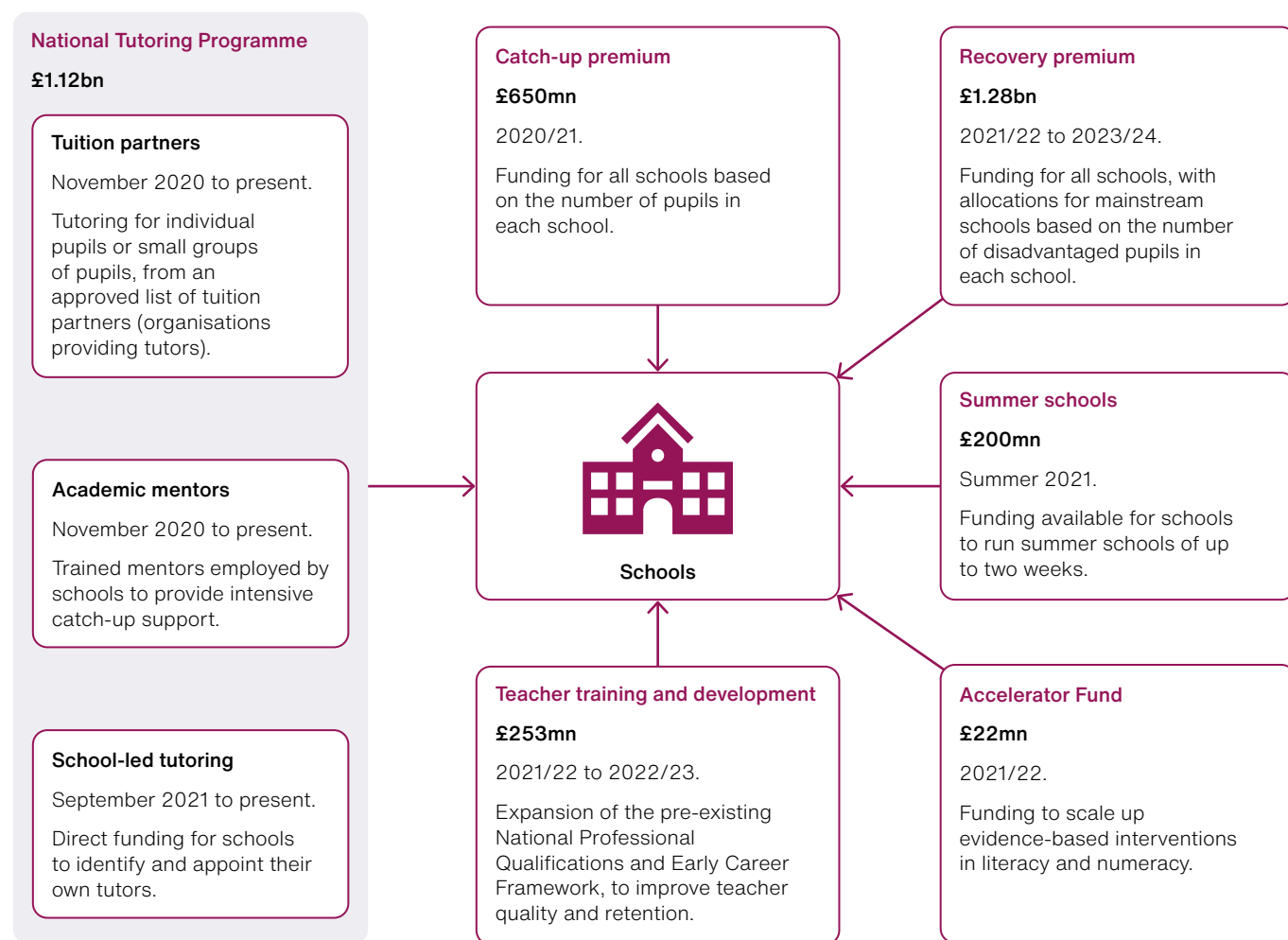
3 Disruption to children's education during the COVID-19 pandemic led to lost learning for many pupils, particularly for disadvantaged children. DfE has announced total funding of £4.9 billion to address learning loss and support education recovery, covering early years, schools and education for 16- to 19-year-olds. Most of this funding (£3.5 billion) is for recovery interventions in schools (**Figure 1** overleaf). The main interventions are:

- the National Tutoring Programme (NTP), which subsidises individual or small-group tutoring and mentoring through three schemes, with a focus on supporting disadvantaged pupils;
- the catch-up premium, which was per-pupil funding for schools during 2020/21; and
- the recovery premium, which replaced the catch-up premium from 2021/22 and, for mainstream schools, is allocated based on how many disadvantaged pupils they have.

Figure 1

The Department for Education's (DfE's) interventions to support education recovery in schools

DfE has a range of interventions to support education recovery in schools

**Notes**

- 1 This Figure shows DfE's recovery interventions in schools. It does not present support for early years or education for 16- to 19-year-olds.
- 2 The amounts shown are the funding made available, not the amounts spent.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Education information

Focus of our report

4 We reported in March 2021 on support for children’s education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ We concluded that it was crucial that DfE took swift and effective action to ensure that the catch-up learning programme was effective and reached the children who had been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, such as those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. Lost learning, if not addressed, may lead to increased disadvantage and significant lost earnings for those affected. It is also likely to have adverse impacts on society and the economy, with implications for productivity and growth, particularly if a generation of young people is affected.

5 This report examines whether DfE is achieving its objective to help pupils recover lost learning by effectively supporting education recovery in schools following the COVID-19 pandemic. The evaluative criteria that we used to assess value for money included: whether DfE used the available evidence in designing its package of recovery interventions; whether DfE has assurance that funding is being used for the intended purposes; what evidence there is on take-up and whether the interventions are reaching disadvantaged pupils as intended; and whether the package of interventions is having an impact in terms of reducing learning loss. Our work did not cover early years, education for 16- to 19-year-olds, or further or higher education.

6 The report covers: the design and funding of the recovery package for schools (Part One); the main interventions provided to support education recovery (Part Two); and the recovery package’s impact (Part Three). Details of our evidence base are set out in Appendix One.

¹ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Support for children’s education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*, Session 2019–2021, HC 1239, National Audit Office, March 2021.

Key findings

Design and funding

7 DfE drew on available evidence in designing and subsequently adapting its education recovery interventions. DfE recognised by summer 2020 that disruption to schooling was leading to children falling behind in their learning and responded quickly to pull together an initial package of measures. In designing its approach to education recovery, DfE drew on existing research, particularly from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), for evidence of what approaches would be most likely to work. This led DfE to include support for tutoring among its first interventions, in the form of the NTP, and later to extend the recovery package to include extra funding for teacher training and development. From June 2020 to October 2021, DfE made four announcements that successively expanded the scope and scale of its interventions. From 2021/22, DfE adjusted the balance of the package so that interventions were more focused on disadvantaged pupils, given their greater learning loss (paragraphs 1.8 to 1.13).

8 Extra funding for education recovery is time-limited, with DfE looking to schools increasingly to fund tutoring themselves. DfE's funding for education recovery in schools totals £3.5 billion and extends across four academic years from 2020/21 to 2023/24. The funding available is forecast to peak at £985 million in 2022/23. DfE is progressively reducing the amount of subsidy it provides under the NTP. So, to continue providing this support, schools will need to fund tutoring from other sources. DfE told us it would like to embed tutoring in the school system because it is recognised as an effective way to address low attainment. However, some of the stakeholders we consulted raised concerns about the long-term financial sustainability of tutoring and mentoring, given the pressures on school budgets. Schools have not used all the recovery funding that DfE has made available. We estimate that, by the end of the 2021-22 financial year, there was a £226 million (14%) underspend against the available funding (paragraphs 1.14 to 1.19).

Interventions to support education recovery

9 DfE gave schools freedom to decide how to use the catch-up and recovery premiums and has not routinely collected information about how the money was used. DfE considered that schools were best placed to decide how to use the extra funding in a way that suited local circumstances and met their pupils' specific needs. It expected them to adopt evidence-based approaches to help pupils catch up on lost learning, and intended that the recovery premium would help schools make up for lost teaching time for disadvantaged pupils specifically. In line with its approach to pupil premium, DfE requires schools to publish a statement each year explaining how they plan to spend the recovery premium and demonstrating that their approach is informed by research evidence. DfE told us it plans to review a sample of these statements in early 2023 (paragraphs 2.4, 2.5, 2.8 and 2.9).

10 DfE strengthened governance of the NTP for 2021/22, which provided it with more assurance than it had in 2020/21 about how funding was spent, although there were still gaps. To get the NTP running quickly in 2020, DfE appointed EEF and Teach First, with whom it had existing relationships, to lead the tuition partners and academic mentors schemes respectively. NTP funding in 2020/21 was treated as an extension of existing grant or contract arrangements and DfE lacked robust processes to provide it with detailed assurance about how the new money was spent. For 2021/22, DfE put delivery of the NTP on a fully contractual footing. After a competitive procurement, it appointed a single contractor, Randstad, to manage both the tuition partners and academic mentors schemes. DfE had reasonable assurance about how funding for tuition partners was spent, but there were gaps in the information on academic mentors' activity (paragraphs 2.14 to 2.18 and 2.25).

11 To help boost take-up, DfE adapted the NTP by adding a school-led tutoring scheme. In September 2021, DfE introduced school-led tutoring in response to feedback from schools that logistical factors (such as the amount of management time needed) were deterring them from engaging with the existing tutoring schemes. School-led tutoring proved more popular with schools than the two other NTP schemes. For 2022/23, DfE decided not to extend its contract with Randstad and to allocate all NTP funding directly to schools. DfE relies on schools to report how they have spent funding for school-led tutoring. The Education and Skills Funding Agency is seeking to recover funding that schools did not use in 2021/22 and expects to publish data in spring 2023 on the amounts recovered (paragraphs 2.19 to 2.23).

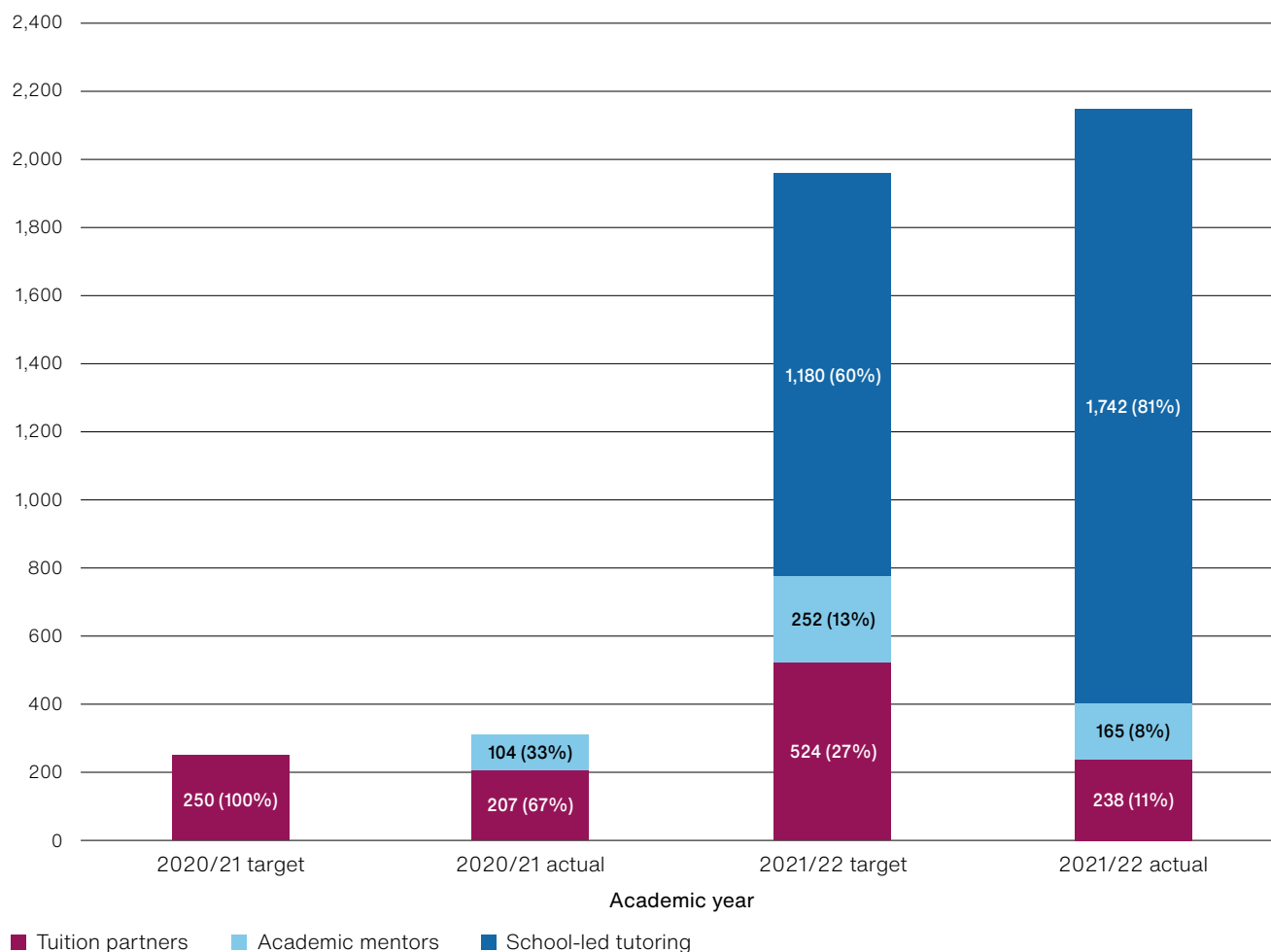
12 Take-up of the NTP tuition partners and academic mentors schemes in 2021/22 was lower than DfE expected, but school-led tutoring more than made up the shortfall. DfE has sufficient data to estimate national take-up of the NTP schemes in 2020/21 and 2021/22. It does not know, however, the extent to which pupils participated in more than one scheme, and therefore the number of unique pupils who were supported by the NTP. Overall, pupils started 311,000 courses under the NTP in 2020/21 and 2.14 million courses in 2021/22, 110% of DfE's target of 1.96 million for that year. In 2021/22, the number of courses started was 45% of DfE's target for the tuition partners scheme and 65% for the academic mentors scheme. School-led tutoring exceeded DfE's target and accounted for 81% of the courses started in 2021/22 (**Figure 2** overleaf). More than 1.3 million pupils (one in five) received school-led tutoring. Between 85% and 90% of schools in each region participated in some form of tutoring under the NTP in 2021/22, with an average of 87% across England (paragraphs 2.24, 2.26 and 2.27, and Figure 5).

Figure 2

Number of courses started under the National Tutoring Programme, 2020/21 and 2021/22

The number of courses started in 2021/22 was 2.14 million, 110% of the Department for Education's (DfE's) overall target for that year

Number of courses started (000)

**Notes**

- Figures refer to courses started. An individual pupil may attend more than one course on the same tutoring scheme or receive tutoring under more than one scheme.
- Figures for courses started are rounded to the nearest thousand. Percentages are calculated from the unrounded data.
- DfE did not set a target for the number of courses started under the academic mentors scheme in 2020/21.
- Figures for the actual number of courses started under the tuition partners and academic mentors schemes for 2020/21 were supplied to DfE by the Education Endowment Foundation and Teach First respectively.
- Figures for the actual number of courses started under the tuition partners and academic mentors schemes for 2021/22 were supplied to DfE by Randstad.
- Figures for the actual number of courses started under the academic mentors scheme for 2021/22 are estimates that DfE calculated using data from a sample of academic mentors who appeared to have supplied reliable data. This group accounted for around 38% of all academic mentors and DfE produced the estimates assuming this sample was representative of the whole population.
- Figures for the actual number of courses started under the school-led tutoring scheme are based on data collected by DfE from schools using the year-end statement. All schools that received funding for school-led tutoring were required to submit this statement once they had completed their tutoring for 2021/22. Figures are based on statements submitted up to 21 November 2022. The number of courses is estimated from the number of pupils receiving tutoring and the number of hours of tutoring delivered.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Education data

13 Around half the pupils receiving tutoring under the NTP were disadvantaged.

DfE set out to focus the NTP on the quarter of children who are classified as disadvantaged, although schools are free to choose which children would benefit most from support. Ofsted found that most schools it visited were using disadvantage as a starting point for identifying which pupils should be prioritised for tuition. Overall, disadvantaged pupils were more likely to receive tutoring in 2021/22 than other pupils. We assessed how far the NTP reached disadvantaged children in 2021/22 in two ways.

- The proportion of pupils receiving tutoring who were disadvantaged: this varied from 47% for school-led tutoring to 51% for tuition partners. DfE's contract with Randstad included a target that 65% of the pupils supported through the tuition partners scheme should be disadvantaged.
- The proportion of all disadvantaged pupils who received tutoring: this was 25% for school-led tutoring (compared with 14% of all pupils) and 5% for tuition partners. DfE did not set a target for the proportion of disadvantaged pupils who should receive tutoring and did not expect them all to be supported in this way (paragraphs 2.30 and 2.31).

Impact of the recovery package

14 DfE has made some progress in addressing pupils' learning loss but this has been inconsistent.

DfE commissioned research to assess pupils' learning loss and how this changed, from autumn 2020 onwards. While there are limitations in the completeness of the data, the research has found variation – by school phase, subject and geographical area – in how far and how quickly pupils have recovered learning. By summer 2021, learning loss had reduced for most pupils. For example, in maths, primary pupils were on average 3.6 months behind where they were expected to be in autumn 2020 and 2.2 months behind in summer 2021. Regionally, the greatest levels of learning loss have consistently been in the north of England. The Key Stage 2 tests of pupils in their final year of primary school in 2022 indicated significant drops in attainment compared with before the COVID-19 pandemic, with 59% of pupils reaching DfE's expected standard in all of reading, writing and maths, down from 65% in 2019 (paragraphs 3.11 to 3.14 and Figures 9 and 10).

15 The gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils has grown since 2019.

Learning loss for disadvantaged pupils has followed a similar pattern to that for all pupils, but the extent of the loss has been consistently greater. For example, in summer 2021, the research for DfE found that disadvantaged secondary pupils were 2.4 months behind where they were expected to be in reading, compared with 1.2 months for all secondary pupils. The 2022 Key Stage 2 tests also indicated that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils at the end of primary school had widened since 2019: the disadvantage gap index (a measure of the difference in attainment) was 3.23 in 2022, compared with 2.91 in 2019 (paragraphs 3.15 to 3.17 and Figure 10).

16 DfE has not specified what level of progress would constitute success for its recovery interventions because it regards the interventions as part of its overall activity to improve pupils' attainment. In May 2021, the Committee of Public Accounts recommended that DfE should set out clear metrics that it would use to monitor the catch-up learning programme, and indicate what level of performance would represent success.² DfE pointed us to the March 2022 white paper which set out the government's ambitions for pupils' attainment in literacy and numeracy by 2030. It is working to monitor progress towards these ambitions but has not set milestones between now and 2030. DfE had a series of strategy and implementation boards that met during 2021-22 and focused specifically on education recovery. After April 2022, DfE subsumed governance of education recovery into its mainstream oversight arrangements, reflecting its view that recovery now forms part of its core business (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.6).

Conclusion on value for money

17 Since 2020, DfE has acted to support education recovery in schools through a range of interventions that were informed by the available evidence as to what would be most likely to work. DfE said that support should be targeted at disadvantaged pupils, given their greater learning loss, but gave schools freedom to decide how best to help pupils catch up. There is limited evidence on how extra direct funding for schools was spent and how far it was used to support disadvantaged pupils. Take up of the centrally run NTP schemes was lower than DfE intended but school-led tutoring boosted take-up to above target. Disadvantaged pupils have been more likely than other pupils to receive tutoring through the NTP, although only a minority have received this extra support. Research indicates that pupils' learning loss is generally reducing but disadvantaged pupils remain further behind the expected level of achievement than other pupils.

18 Our examination focused on the first two years of DfE's interventions to support education recovery in schools. While progress is being made, a final assessment of whether DfE has effectively supported recovery will depend on what happens in the coming years, with nearly half the extra funding scheduled to be spent in 2022/23 and 2023/24. It is vital therefore that DfE maintains its focus on the implementation and impact of its recovery interventions if it is to achieve its ambitions of giving all children the chance to make up the learning they lost and improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged pupils specifically.

² HC Committee of Public Accounts, *COVID-19: Support for children's education*, Third Report of Session 2021-22, HC 240, May 2021.

Recommendations

- 19** We recommend that DfE should:
- a** further develop its approach to monitoring progress towards achieving the ambitions for pupils' attainment in 2030, as set out in the schools white paper, and report regularly on progress;
 - b** use research and evidence, including exploring the possibility of systematic longitudinal monitoring, to assess education recovery in schools, including whether children have recovered lost learning and whether progress is being made to close the disadvantage gap;
 - c** model the impact of withdrawing the recovery premium and subsidy for the NTP, to assess whether tutoring in schools is financially sustainable given DfE's objective for tutoring to become embedded in the school system;
 - d** build on the evidence and insights being gathered from stakeholder bodies and schools to understand how recovery interventions can best support disadvantaged pupils in the way DfE intends, and use the findings to inform and share good practice; and
 - e** ensure regular senior oversight of education recovery in schools remains in place, since funding is to continue until 2023/24 and successfully delivering programmes and achieving education recovery is not yet assured.