Curriculum and Assessment Review
Volunteering Matters response – November 2024

Executive Summary

As an organisation, Volunteering Matters mobilises volunteers to strengthen communities, empower young people, and improve educational access and inclusion across the UK. Through initiatives in educational settings, we work to foster youth agency, diversify learning experiences, and address exclusionary barriers in education, ensuring continuity of support during critical transitions and creating an inclusive environment for all students. We have answered the consultation questions for which we have the most relevant evidence and expertise.

This summary highlights how volunteering, youth social action, and community engagement can transform education, fostering equity, personal growth, and community resilience. By embedding these practices into curricula and assessment frameworks, education can evolve beyond academic achievement to empower every student as an active contributor to society.

Education as a Universal Human Right

Education is a fundamental human right that must serve every child, regardless of background, race, religion, or medical condition. However, current systems often fragment educational provision, creating hierarchies between mainstream, private, specialist, alternative provision, and pupil referral units (PRUs). This segregation perpetuates inequities, disproportionately affecting students in alternative provision, specialist settings, and those within the youth criminal justice system—groups that frequently bear the brunt of systemic racial and ableist inequalities.

Data underscores these disparities. A report from the Office for National Statistics revealed that 13.5% of individuals who received custodial sentences had attended a PRU, compared to just 0.4% of those with no criminal convictions. This stark contrast highlights the urgent need to prioritise and support children in alternative provisions to prevent their progression into the criminal justice system.

Volunteering Matters advocates for an integrated approach to education, where volunteering acts as a unifying mechanism to foster lifelong learning and empower communities. By investing in place-based strategies that promote collaboration between institutions, education can break free from its silos, ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for all young people. Education must not only prepare students for life but also connect them to their communities, building resilience and fostering collective growth.

This approach requires a shift in policy and practice, recognising that education is not the sole responsibility of a single government department but a discipline that should underpin the work of all sectors equitably within communities. By dismantling silos and fostering collaboration, we can create an education system that truly serves every child, fulfilling the promise of education as a universal human right.

Priority Themes and Messages

1. **Co-Production and Advocacy**

Schools must adopt co-production as a guiding principle, creating systems that actively listen to students and empower them to shape their educational journey. Advocacy mechanisms are critical to ensuring that every child's voice is heard and respected.

2. **Equity and Diversity in the Curriculum**

Equity must be embedded at every level of education. Curricula should embrace diversity, reflect the experiences of all students, and actively tackle systemic discrimination. Research demonstrates that inclusive curricula improve engagement and outcomes for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

3. **Community Volunteering as a Resource**

Leveraging community volunteers within schools brings fresh expertise, perspectives, and resources to education, enriching students' learning while building vital connections between schools and their communities.

4. **Addressing Fragmentation and Inequity in Educational Provision**

Current systems often fragment educational provision, creating hierarchies between mainstream, private, specialist, alternative provision, and pupil referral units (PRUs). This fragmentation perpetuates inequities and disproportionately disadvantages students in alternative provision, specialist settings, and those within the youth criminal justice system. These groups, who frequently bear the brunt of systemic racial and ableist inequalities, must be prioritised through targeted investment, collaboration, and equitable resourcing.

5. **Embedding Volunteering and Youth Social Action into the Curriculum**

Volunteering and youth social action should be integral to school life. These experiences develop leadership, resilience, and civic responsibility while helping students apply their education to real-world challenges. Research consistently shows that students involved in social action report stronger academic performance, emotional well-being, and critical life skills.

6. **Enhancing Youth Voice and Leadership**

- Create platforms for young people to lead, such as student councils, youth forums, and hackathons.

- Embed co-creation in curriculum design, ensuring students' perspectives shape their learning experiences.

7. **Investing in Communities and Local Ecosystems**

- Promote school-community partnerships to foster skills development, such as financial literacy, work experience, and debate.

- Encourage local businesses to invest in education, offering resources, mentorship, and job opportunities.

8. **Fostering Mental Health and Well-Being:**

- Train educators and volunteers in trauma-informed approaches to support students' emotional and social development.

- Integrate relational approaches into teaching, focusing on trusted relationships and peer networks.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. **Embed Co-Production Mechanisms in Schools**

Schools must establish systems to co-create education with students, empowering them to lead and advocate for change.

2. **Reframe Assessment Models**

Flexible, formative, and project-based assessments should replace rigid, exam-focused systems. These inclusive models recognise diverse skills, including creativity, collaboration, and emotional intelligence.

3. **Expand Mentoring and Guidance Provision**

Every student should have access to a trusted mentor or adviser for personalised support. Mentoring ensures young people, particularly those facing structural disadvantages, have the guidance they need to succeed.

4. **Foster Community Partnerships**

Strengthen collaboration between schools, local authorities, businesses, and community organisations. These partnerships build holistic support systems for students, linking education to practical opportunities and life skills.

5. **Promote Youth Social Action**

Integrate youth-led social action into curricula to encourage leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving. These initiatives empower students to become active participants in their communities and shape their own futures.

6. **Address Systemic Barriers**

Provide targeted interventions to dismantle systemic barriers faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Equitable access to resources and support is essential to achieving fairness and opportunity in education.

Conclusion

By placing equity, co-production, and community collaboration at the heart of education, we can create a system where every young person thrives. Volunteering, youth social action, and community-driven approaches provide the foundation for a transformative educational experience—one that empowers students to build resilient, inclusive communities and shape a brighter future for themselves and others.

Question 13: In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)
Barriers based on protected characteristics

Answer:
Students across the UK face significant barriers to fully engaging in education. These challenges are especially pronounced for students with disabilities, refugees, and asylum seekers, who often encounter systemic inequalities that undermine their attainment, progress, and participation. Addressing these barriers requires a commitment to equity, inclusion, and evidence-based solutions that prioritise the strengths and potential of every learner.

Education systems must recognise that intersecting identities—such as race, disability, gender, and socioeconomic status—shape students' access and experiences in unique

ways. For instance, 52% of children in low-income households live with a disabled family member, highlighting the compounding effects of poverty and disability on educational outcomes. Similarly, a disabled refugee or LGBTQ+ asylum seeker may face overlapping layers of discrimination, each impacting their participation in education differently. An intersectional approach ensures that interventions are responsive to these diverse and overlapping challenges, creating supportive environments where students can thrive.

Barriers Faced by Disabled, Refugee, and Asylum-Seeking Students

Students with disabilities, refugees, and asylum seekers frequently encounter overlapping barriers to education. Mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), are particularly common. Refugee children are three to four times more likely to experience PTSD than their peers, while disabled students are disproportionately affected by stigma and exclusion. Trauma-informed teaching practices are essential for addressing these challenges and fostering student engagement.

Bullying and social exclusion further compound the difficulties these students face. Studies show that one in five refugee children experiences bullying in school, a rate similar to that of disabled students. This can lead to reduced self-esteem, social withdrawal, and disengagement from education. A Department for Education survey found that students in inclusive classrooms, where empathy and collaboration are embedded in the culture, are 15% less likely to experience bullying.

Economic insecurity is another critical barrier. Families of asylum seekers live on less than £6 per day, making it difficult to afford school supplies, transportation, or extracurricular activities. Similarly, disabled households require an additional £1,200 per month to achieve the same standard of living as non-disabled households, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. These financial pressures severely limit students' ability to participate fully in education.

Delays in accessing education also hinder progress. Refugee children often face enrolment delays of six months or more, exacerbating learning gaps. Similarly, disabled students frequently wait years for appropriate placements or Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs), leaving them without the tailored support they need. A lack of specialist training and resources further undermines students' progress and sense of belonging, with 80% of teachers in a recent NASUWT survey saying they feel underprepared to support students with SEND or trauma.

Addressing Barriers Inside and Beyond the Classroom

Research underscores the importance of flexible teaching methods and personalised support plans in overcoming these barriers. Student-centred teaching approaches, such as group work, visual aids, and hands-on learning, have been shown to improve engagement and attainment for students with additional needs. Individualised education plans, combined with assistive technology, can boost SEND students' attainment by up to 15% compared to peers without tailored interventions.

Inclusive classrooms, where students with and without disabilities learn together, foster empathy, self-esteem, and academic growth for all. However, barriers beyond the classroom also need addressing. Disabled households are disproportionately affected by poverty, and nearly half of disabled individuals are unemployed. Persistent absence rates among students with EHCPs exceed 34%, and these students are nearly four times more likely to face exclusions. Addressing these systemic issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including financial support for families, access to emotional support, and investment in accessible school transport.

Transport is a critical issue. Cuts to school transport funding disproportionately affect disabled students, limiting their ability to attend school regularly. The Local Government Association has highlighted this gap as a significant barrier to educational access. Similarly, chronic loneliness among disabled individuals, who are 40% more likely to experience social isolation, impacts mental health and engagement in education. Structured social opportunities, such as peer mentoring and youth groups, can mitigate these effects and foster a sense of belonging.

Place-based, community-led approaches to education offer powerful solutions. Initiatives in cities like Ipswich demonstrate how local partnerships and youth-led projects can address complex challenges, such as mental health disparities and social isolation. Research from the RSA supports the role of community-driven responses in improving educational outcomes, particularly in areas with high levels of deprivation.

While this response focuses on barriers for disabled and refugee/asylum-seeking students, it is important to recognise that other identities—such as sexual orientation, gender, and religion—also intersect with these characteristics. LGBTQ+ refugees, for instance, may face unique vulnerabilities that require tailored, intersectional responses. Similarly, religious students may feel alienated if their needs, such as prayer times or dietary accommodations, are not met. By addressing barriers through this intersectional lens, education systems can become more inclusive and equitable for all.

Conclusion

In the UK, over 1.4 million children with SEND and 50,000 refugee and asylum-seeking children face barriers that, if left unaddressed, will have long-term economic and societal costs. For example, poor educational access for these groups increases dependency on welfare and reduces workforce participation, costing the UK economy an estimated £8 billion annually (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2020).

Evidence shows that addressing systemic barriers through trauma-informed teaching, flexible support systems, and community-led approaches significantly improves outcomes. Investing in these strategies is not just a moral imperative—it is an economic and societal necessity. By acting now, the UK can create an education system that ensures no student is left behind.

Question 14. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?
Barriers based on SEND:

Answer:
Barriers in Curriculum, Assessment, and Qualification Pathways for Learners with SEND

The current educational framework presents significant barriers to attainment, progress, access, and participation for learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). With 18.4% of pupils in England identified as having SEND (Nasen, 2024), the education system must address these barriers to ensure equitable opportunities for all learners. Below, we outline key barriers and propose strategic recommendations to create an inclusive and responsive learning environment.

Enhancing Youth Voice and Co-Creation in Curriculum Design

SEND students often feel disconnected from a prescriptive curriculum that fails to reflect their interests or goals. Empowering students to influence their learning pathways increases engagement and relevance. Co-creating curricula that incorporate practical life skills—such as financial literacy, interpersonal communication, and vocational training—provides meaningful, real-world connections and better prepares learners for adulthood.

The lack of disability-positive materials and cultural representation in learning content further alienates many SEND students, limiting both access and participation. For instance, the omission of practical social and emotional learning skills creates a disconnect between the curriculum and the real-world needs of SEND learners. Evidence shows that co-creation increases student engagement by 22% (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022), highlighting the value of participatory approaches.

Recommendation: Embed youth voice and co-creation into curriculum design to enhance relevance and ownership, improving participation and progress while fostering a stronger connection to learning.

Reframing Alternative Provision (AP)

Alternative Provision (AP) is often perceived as a last resort for students unable to succeed in mainstream education, reinforcing stigma and limiting its potential. Many students in AP have intersectional challenges—such as undiagnosed disabilities, trauma, or neurodivergence—that arise from unaddressed needs in mainstream settings.

The stigma surrounding AP is compounded by poor outcomes. Only 4% of students in AP achieve a strong pass in GCSE Maths and English, compared to 40% in mainstream schools (Education Policy Institute, 2023). Early interventions in mainstream settings, combined with high-quality, flexible support within AP, are essential to improving outcomes and reducing stigma.

Recommendation: Reframe AP as a core component of a high-quality education system, focusing on early interventions, reintegration opportunities, and destigmatisation.

Expanding Assessment Diversity and Qualification Pathways

Traditional assessments, such as standardised exams, disproportionately disadvantage SEND students, who may experience anxiety, processing difficulties, or sensory challenges. A rigid focus on GCSEs and A-Levels limits opportunities for many SEND learners, even though vocational qualifications and functional skills often align better with their strengths.

Moreover, traditional assessments often fail to capture incremental progress, which is vital for SEND learners who develop at varied rates. Evidence from the National Foundation for Educational Research (2021) shows that flexible assessment methods, such as portfolios and oral examinations, can improve attainment for SEND students by up to 15%.

Recommendation: Broaden assessment methods and qualification pathways to better reflect the diverse strengths of SEND learners, ensuring their progress and attainment are fairly recognised.

Addressing Social and Emotional Barriers

SEND students face higher rates of bullying, social isolation, and mental health challenges. Data from the Office for National Statistics (2022) indicates that SEND students are twice as likely to experience clinical anxiety or depression compared to their peers.

Trauma-informed support, alongside inclusive school cultures, is essential to fostering resilience and reducing these risks. Empathetic approaches that prioritise social and emotional learning not only improve well-being but also enhance academic engagement. These interventions are particularly important for participation, as bullying and isolation often lead to absenteeism and disengagement.

Recommendation: Embed trauma-informed approaches within all schools, ensuring inclusive and supportive environments that reduce bullying and foster mental well-being.

Increasing Resources and Specialist Training

Schools frequently struggle to meet the complex needs of SEND students due to limited funding and a lack of specialist training. Budget constraints have reduced access to assistive technology and other resources that can enable tailored support. Moreover, many educators report feeling unprepared to support SEND learners, particularly those with complex or overlapping needs.

Specialist training for teachers in SEND-specific and culturally responsive practices is essential. Equipping staff with the skills to address diverse needs improves inclusion and ensures that all students receive the support they require to progress.

Recommendation: Increase investment in SEND-specialised resources and training for educators, ensuring schools can effectively meet the needs of all learners.

Overcoming Economic and Structural Barriers

Financial hardship disproportionately affects SEND families, who often face additional costs related to medical and specialised support. Cuts to school transport funding exacerbate these challenges, limiting access to education and increasing absenteeism. The Local Government Association has highlighted this issue as a significant barrier, particularly for students in rural and low-income areas.

Investing in accessible infrastructure and hyperlocal resources ensures that all students, regardless of location or socioeconomic status, can participate fully in education. These investments reduce financial pressures on families and remove logistical barriers to access.

Recommendation: Invest in hyperlocal resources and accessible infrastructure to close gaps in traditional support systems and reduce financial pressures on SEND families.

Supporting Transitions to Post-School Opportunities

Transitions into further education, training, or employment are often challenging for SEND students due to limited vocational preparation and biases against non-traditional pathways. Despite the alignment of vocational qualifications with the strengths of many SEND learners, these pathways are frequently undervalued.

Providing mentorship and building relational networks can significantly ease these transitions. Research highlights the importance of community-based support in enabling SEND learners to navigate post-school opportunities effectively. Improving access to

functional skills training and employability programmes ensures that SEND learners are better equipped for adulthood.

Recommendation: Enhance mentorship programmes and employability skills training to support SEND students' transitions into further education, training, or employment.

Cross-Cutting Strategic Recommendations

1. **Sustainable Funding and Partnerships**: Secure long-term funding to support sustained interventions, and mandate voluntary sector involvement in SEND partnerships to leverage community expertise.
2. **Personalised, Rights-Based Approaches**: Implement flexible support systems that adapt to individual needs and recognise the value of social action within education.
3. **Hyperlocal Community Support**: Invest in place-based resources to build accessible, community-centred support for SEND students.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by SEND learners in the current education system are not inevitable but the result of systemic barriers that can and must be dismantled. By embedding youth voice, diversifying qualification pathways, and investing in specialist resources, we can build an education system that equips all learners to succeed. This is not just a question of fairness—it is an economic, social, and moral imperative that will benefit society as a whole.

Question 15: In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any enablers that support attainment, progress, access or participation for the groups listed above? [e.g. socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, pupils with SEND, pupils who are otherwise vulnerable, and young people with protected characteristics].

Answer:

The current educational framework includes several provisions and strategies that act as enablers for socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), vulnerable students, and those with protected characteristics. These enablers address barriers to attainment, progress, access, and participation by fostering inclusivity, adaptability, and collaboration.

By embedding flexible practices, increasing student agency, and leveraging community resources, these enablers create opportunities for all learners to thrive. Below, we outline the most impactful enablers and their outcomes, focusing on their connection to the curriculum, assessment system, and qualification pathways.

Flexible Curricula, Inclusive Assessments, and Personalised Pathways

Flexibility within the curriculum enables students with diverse needs to access learning opportunities and progress according to their abilities. Personalised learning pathways, which tailor content and pacing to individual needs, are particularly effective for SEND students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research from the Education Endowment Foundation shows that personalised learning improves engagement by 15% and attainment by 10%.

Alternative Provision (AP), when reframed as an inclusive and integral part of the education system, also provides essential support. By addressing underlying needs such as

neurodivergence, trauma, or mental health challenges, AP can maintain pathways for reintegration and progress, while reducing the stigma often associated with its use.

Assessment systems that accommodate diverse needs further empower students to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities effectively. Alternatives to high-stakes exams—such as coursework, portfolios, and project-based assessments—are particularly beneficial for students with SEND, exam anxiety, or mental health challenges. For example, a Department for Education pilot found that alternative assessment methods reduced anxiety-related absenteeism by 20%.

Expanding vocational qualifications and functional skills pathways ensures students can pursue education that aligns with their strengths and aspirations. Data from the Careers & Enterprise Company indicates that vocational qualifications increase employability by 12% for disadvantaged young people, providing them with practical, industry-relevant skills.

These enablers collectively improve access by addressing systemic barriers, foster participation by reducing disengagement, and support both progress and attainment by aligning education with individual needs and strengths.

Social-Emotional Development, Pastoral Support, and Targeted Resources

Social-emotional support is critical for helping students overcome barriers to participation and academic progress. Schools embedding trauma-informed approaches and pastoral care report improved engagement and attendance, particularly among SEND students and those with adverse childhood experiences. Evidence shows that students participating in mentorship programmes are 55% more likely to pursue higher education and demonstrate better attendance.

Targeted resource allocation, such as Pupil Premium funding, allows schools to provide tutoring, enrichment activities, and assistive technologies that reduce financial barriers for disadvantaged students. Schools using Pupil Premium effectively report narrowed attainment gaps and improved access to resources. Similarly, investing in specialist training for educators—such as SEND-specific or culturally responsive practices—enables schools to create inclusive classrooms that meet diverse needs. Schools with dedicated SEND staff report a 15% improvement in academic engagement among SEND pupils (DfE, 2023).

These initiatives improve participation by fostering resilience and belonging, enhance access through the removal of systemic barriers, and drive progress and attainment through personalised interventions and targeted support.

Collaboration, Community Engagement, and Place-Based Approaches

Cross-sector collaboration expands the support available to students and strengthens the educational ecosystem. Partnerships between schools and voluntary or community organisations provide extracurricular opportunities, mentorship, and wraparound support that complements school-based interventions. Schools working with voluntary organisations report a 30% increase in participation in extracurricular activities, which correlates with higher academic achievement and social skills.

Youth-led initiatives, such as social action projects, empower students to take ownership of their education and their communities, fostering confidence and a sense of belonging. Research indicates that these initiatives improve engagement and increase students' sense of agency by 40%.

Place-based approaches further strengthen educational outcomes by tailoring resources and solutions to the specific needs of local communities. Studies show that these approaches increase positive community engagement by 25% and reduce anti-social behaviour by up to 20%.

These strategies enhance access by addressing localised challenges, promote participation through community involvement, and support progress by creating environments where students feel valued and supported.

Conclusion

The enablers within the current curriculum, assessment system, and qualification pathways support attainment, progress, access, and participation for socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, SEND learners, vulnerable pupils, and young people with protected characteristics. By expanding inclusive practices, promoting flexible pathways, and fostering community partnerships, these enablers can drive meaningful, systemic change. Sustained investment in these approaches will ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to succeed.

Question 20: How can we better support learners who do not achieve level 2 in English and maths by 16 to learn what they need to thrive as citizens in work and life? In particular, do we have the right qualifications at level 2 for these 16-19 learners (including the maths and English study requirement)?
Supporting young people, particularly those facing systemic barriers, requires an education system that values practical skills, cultural representation, and democratic engagement. By embedding volunteering, social action, and community-based learning into the curriculum, we can prepare young people to thrive as active, informed citizens.

The Case for Reform
Traditional qualification pathways fail to meet the needs of all learners. In 2022, 40% of young people in England did not achieve Level 2 qualifications in English and maths by age 16, with disadvantaged students disproportionately affected. Flexible, inclusive approaches—such as Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs), modular certifications, and project-based learning—can ensure education remains relevant and motivating.

Key subjects like art, sport, and citizenship are uniquely positioned to foster engagement and personal development when integrated with social action:

- **Art**: Encourages self-expression, identity exploration, and problem-solving. Volunteering through art-based projects fosters teamwork and confidence while addressing societal challenges.
- **Sport**: Builds teamwork, physical and mental well-being, and leadership. Community-based sports initiatives engage students with their local area.
- **Citizenship Education**: Prepares young people for democratic participation and social responsibility. Embedding volunteering opportunities within citizenship courses enhances leadership and community connection.

Barriers and Solutions
To create equitable opportunities, systemic barriers like poverty, SEND, and cultural exclusion must be addressed. Flexible assessment pathways, such as project-based portfolios, validate diverse achievements and reduce reliance on high-stakes exams. Inclusive teaching materials and SEND accommodations ensure all students can access education meaningfully. Evidence shows that inclusive approaches build belonging, engagement, and confidence, particularly for marginalised students.

Democratic education and life skills are essential for equipping young people for adulthood. Modules on financial literacy, digital skills, and interpersonal communication cultivate practical competencies. Topics like unconscious bias and decolonization foster empathy and critical thinking. Students engaged with these areas report increased motivation and preparedness for the future.

The Role of Social Action and Volunteering
Research, such as the UK Youth Economic Value of Youth Work report, demonstrates that every £1 invested in youth work generates £3.20 in societal value through improved well-being and skills. Volunteering and social action embed purpose in education, helping young people develop resilience, adaptability, and a sense of agency while strengthening community ties.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Reform Qualifications**: Expand flexible, modular certifications and embed Functional Skills within practical, real-world contexts.
2. **Leverage Key Subjects**: Use art, sport, and citizenship education to foster engagement through social action and volunteering.
3. **Integrate Inclusive Practices**: Adopt flexible assessments and culturally representative curricula to ensure equitable access for all learners.
4. **Embed Life Skills**: Integrate financial literacy, digital skills, and interpersonal communication into core curricula.
5. **Support Social Action**: Establish volunteering and community engagement as standard educational experiences, creating pathways for youth leadership and societal contribution.

Conclusion
By integrating practical qualifications, inclusive curricula, and social action opportunities into education, we can empower young people to succeed and contribute meaningfully to society. These reforms will ensure all learners, regardless of background, can thrive in life and work.

Question 23: Are there particular changes that could be made to ensure the curriculum (including qualification content) is more diverse and representative of society?

Marginalised communities in the UK face persistent barriers to accessing and succeeding in education, including socio-economic disadvantages, systemic discrimination, and inaccessible support systems. Students from low-income families are 23% less likely to achieve a strong pass in GCSEs compared to their wealthier peers, with disadvantaged students facing an 18-month attainment gap by the end of secondary school. Volunteering offers a vital alternative pathway for these communities, enabling individuals to develop essential skills, build confidence, and engage meaningfully with society despite structural barriers.

For ethnic minority students and those from migrant communities, challenges such as language barriers, a lack of cultural representation in curricula, and systemic racism contribute to lower educational outcomes. Black Caribbean students, for example, are among the lowest-performing groups in terms of attainment, and Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children consistently face the greatest barriers to education. Language barriers further disadvantage migrant and refugee children, with research from the Refugee Council showing that asylum-seeking children often struggle to access GCSE qualifications due to interrupted schooling, mental health challenges, and legal uncertainty. Volunteering provides

a flexible, inclusive environment for these students to develop language skills and adapt to UK cultural norms while building resilience and confidence.

Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) face additional challenges, including delays in securing Education, Health, and Care (EHC) Plans, which can take over 20 weeks to process. Only 22% of students with SEND achieve a standard pass in GCSE English and maths, compared to 65% of their peers. Volunteering offers SEND students opportunities to engage in experiential learning that aligns with their strengths and interests, bypassing some of the rigidities of traditional educational systems. Evidence shows that inclusive volunteering environments help SEND students develop social-emotional skills, resilience, and a sense of agency.

Volunteering is particularly effective at addressing the barriers these groups face by creating pathways for practical learning and empowerment. For instance, young people from low-income communities often lack access to extracurricular opportunities or work experience, which are critical for employability. Studies by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) highlight that disadvantaged young people engage in volunteering to gain these experiences, developing skills like teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership. Similarly, volunteering-based programs for migrants and refugees, such as language-focused mentoring, have been shown to improve English proficiency and foster social integration.

By linking education with community action, volunteering provides a sense of purpose and belonging that is often missing in traditional schooling. Ethnic minority students involved in social action projects report improved mental well-being and engagement with education, while volunteering initiatives for refugees have demonstrated positive impacts on mental health, reducing isolation and fostering hope. Programs that connect students to mentors—particularly intergenerational mentoring schemes—are effective in providing stability and trusted relationships, especially for care-experienced youth. These initiatives not only support young people in overcoming educational barriers but also foster reciprocal learning, with mentors gaining valuable insights into the perspectives of younger generations.

Flexible assessment pathways are also critical for creating equitable educational opportunities. High-stakes exams disproportionately disadvantage students who do not thrive under traditional assessment models, particularly those with SEND or English as an Additional Language (EAL). By incorporating project-based and portfolio assessments, schools can validate diverse achievements and create more inclusive learning environments. Research indicates that students participating in skills-based volunteering programs report higher levels of engagement and motivation, particularly when their contributions are recognized as part of their educational journey.

Education must also address systemic inequities by integrating diverse and representative curricula. Current content often reinforces dominant narratives, neglecting the contributions and experiences of marginalised groups. History curricula, for example, should include global perspectives and the stories of ethnic minorities, migrants, and underrepresented communities. Literature in English courses should feature authors from diverse backgrounds to foster empathy and critical thinking. Citizenship education offers a platform for teaching about social movements, civic responsibility, and democratic engagement, which can be directly tied to volunteering and social action projects. Data from the UK Youth Economic Value of Youth Work report demonstrates that every £1 invested in youth work, including volunteering initiatives, generates £3.20 in societal value by improving skills, well-being, and community cohesion.

Incorporating volunteering into education creates opportunities for experiential and purpose-driven learning that transcend traditional academic pathways. Students develop real-world

competencies such as financial literacy, communication, and cultural awareness, which are essential for navigating adulthood. This approach also promotes lifelong learning by instilling a sense of agency, adaptability, and commitment to community well-being. By embedding volunteering into the curriculum, particularly within subjects like citizenship, history, and PSHE, schools can enhance engagement while preparing students for future challenges.

For education to be truly inclusive, systemic barriers must be dismantled. This requires increased funding for under-resourced schools, streamlined processes for SEND support, and greater investment in teacher training to equip educators with the skills to deliver inclusive, representative content. Recognizing the transformative potential of volunteering is essential for creating an education system that values diversity and ensures all young people, regardless of background, can succeed and contribute meaningfully to society.

Question 24: To what extent does the current curriculum (including qualification content) support students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about, and respect, others? Are there elements that could be improved?

Answer:
The UK curriculum includes essential components to help students positively engage with others and develop respect and understanding. Subjects like Citizenship and PSHE, Religious Education (RE), History, and English Literature provide a foundation for fostering empathy, social awareness, and ethical thinking. However, significant opportunities remain to enhance inclusivity, representation, and practical applications, particularly through social action and volunteering.

Strengths of the Current Curriculum

Citizenship and PSHE education provide students with essential knowledge about democracy, human rights, and community responsibility. The Department for Education (DfE) has shown that PSHE improves social skills and emotional well-being, particularly when lessons are tied to real-world applications. Volunteering amplifies these benefits by enabling students to apply their learning in community contexts, fostering empathy, problem-solving, and responsibility. Similarly, Religious Education encourages respect for cultural differences by introducing students to diverse belief systems. Volunteering opportunities that support cultural exchange can reinforce these lessons, helping students navigate and appreciate diversity.

Subjects like History and English Literature explore diverse narratives and societal changes, promoting empathy and critical thinking. By engaging with a range of identities and experiences, students develop a greater understanding of others. For example, stories of migration or social justice movements can inspire students to connect with wider societal issues. However, these strengths are undermined by gaps in representation, which can limit the curriculum's relevance to all learners.

Opportunities for Improvement

The curriculum could better support students in positively engaging with others by embedding inclusivity and social action more deeply across qualification content.

Expanding the representation of marginalised histories and contemporary social issues would address one of the most significant gaps. Research from the Runnymede Trust shows that students are more engaged when their own histories and cultural backgrounds are reflected in the curriculum. Including stories of migration, empire, and underrepresented

voices in History and English Literature would promote a more inclusive understanding of society and help students connect with their learning.

PSHE could also be expanded to include modules on conflict resolution, practical empathy-building, and cross-cultural communication. Embedding these lessons within real-world volunteering projects would provide students with experiential learning opportunities, which the British Psychological Society identifies as crucial for building resilience and interpersonal skills. Similarly, UNESCO emphasizes that cross-cultural competencies prepare students to thrive in a globalized world.

Volunteering and social action offer transformative potential for fostering respect and positive engagement. Research in the *Journal of Happiness Studies* links volunteering to improved well-being, social cohesion, and life satisfaction. Embedding volunteering into qualifications—particularly in subjects like Citizenship, PSHE, and History—would enable students to connect their academic learning to real-world challenges. For example, social action projects could help students address issues such as poverty, inequality, and climate change, developing a sense of agency and responsibility as active citizens.

In addition, play, teamwork, and creativity remain underutilized tools for fostering positive engagement. Ofsted research highlights the importance of collaborative and creative activities for building empathy, social resilience, and collaboration. Volunteering can bridge this gap by framing social action as a form of creative engagement, sustaining curiosity and connection throughout a student's educational journey.

Finally, embedding experiential learning into the curriculum would help students understand systemic inequalities and their impact on society. Real-world volunteering projects, such as those addressing local poverty or health disparities, give students firsthand insights into systemic challenges while fostering empathy and a commitment to equity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While the current curriculum provides a foundation for fostering respect and positive engagement, embedding social action and volunteering opportunities across subjects would significantly enhance its inclusivity and impact. Expanding the representation of marginalised histories, integrating practical social skills into PSHE, and making volunteering an integral part of qualifications would better equip students to engage with diverse communities. These changes would not only improve educational outcomes but also foster empathy, respect, and a commitment to equity, preparing students to thrive in a rapidly changing society.

Question 27: In which ways do the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

he current 16-19 curriculum in the United Kingdom provides strong academic and vocational pathways through qualifications like GCSEs, A-levels, BTECs, and T-Levels. Core subjects such as Mathematics, English, and Science prepare students for higher education and employment, while vocational routes offer career-specific training. Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE) education also supports life skills development, including financial literacy and personal health. However, despite these strengths, the curriculum often emphasizes standardized assessments over experiential learning, leaving gaps in practical skills, resilience, and community engagement.

These gaps are particularly pronounced for students from low-income or SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) backgrounds. According to the Education Policy Institute

(2022), students from disadvantaged backgrounds are 24% less likely to achieve Level 3 qualifications by age 19 compared to their peers. This attainment gap reflects unequal access to opportunities for practical learning and extracurricular activities that build adaptability, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Additionally, less than 50% of young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds participate in enrichment activities like volunteering or clubs, compared to over 70% of their more affluent peers (Youth Access, 2021). Standardized assessments focus heavily on cognitive skills but do not consistently equip students with the flexibility and interpersonal abilities required for success in dynamic, real-world environments.

Volunteering offers a practical solution to bridge these gaps, providing students with experiential learning opportunities that complement traditional education. The National Youth Social Action Survey (2019) found that over 80% of young volunteers reported improved confidence, purpose, and teamwork skills. Additionally, the UK Centre for Volunteering Studies highlights that 88% of young people engaged in volunteering developed organizational and problem-solving skills, critical for employability. Volunteering fosters emotional resilience, with 75% of participants in the National Youth Social Action Survey reporting increased preparedness for life's challenges. For students with SEND, volunteering offers personalized, flexible opportunities to develop critical life skills in inclusive, supportive environments. Research by the British Council (2022) shows that young people engaged in structured volunteering demonstrate a 30% higher likelihood of entering meaningful employment compared to peers who lack such experiences.

Real-world examples illustrate how volunteering addresses key skills gaps. For instance, environmental projects like *Action Earth* foster teamwork, responsibility, and problem-solving skills. Mentoring programs develop leadership and adaptability, while virtual volunteering strengthens digital literacy—an increasingly vital skill for modern workplaces. Data from the Education and Employers Taskforce (2021) highlights that students engaged in mentoring programs report a 27% increase in confidence navigating transitions into work and further study. These initiatives demonstrate that structured volunteering can blend technical and interpersonal skills, preparing students for future challenges.

To strengthen the 16-19 curriculum, incorporating the principles of *The Vision for Volunteering*—awareness, power, experimentation, collaboration, and recognition—could drive meaningful improvements. Volunteering cultivates community awareness and responsibility, with 87% of young participants in social action projects reporting a stronger sense of civic duty (Youth Social Action Survey, 2019). Empowering students to take leadership roles within volunteering, as seen in programs like *Brighter Futures*, increases agency and builds resilience, with 70% of young volunteers in a British Youth Council study reporting enhanced confidence in their decision-making abilities. Experimentation through volunteering allows students to learn from trial and error, fostering adaptability and problem-solving. Collaboration between schools, local organizations, and community groups enhances connection, showing students the value of education as a shared, community-centred activity. Finally, recognizing the skills gained through volunteering reinforces its value, boosting students' employability and self-esteem.

To better support students' preparation for future study, work, and life, the curriculum must integrate structured volunteering opportunities that connect academic content to practical applications. Student-led projects and activism can empower young people to shape their educational and community environments, fostering leadership and civic responsibility. Flexible, accredited assessment models should formally recognize the skills gained through volunteering, while expanded mentoring programs can provide peer support and intergenerational learning. Strengthened school-community partnerships are also essential for delivering resources and creating meaningful engagement opportunities. An inclusive

curriculum that reflects the diversity of students' lived experiences will ensure that all learners feel valued and equipped to succeed.

While the current curriculum provides essential academic foundations, embedding volunteering into its design can address critical gaps in practical and interpersonal skills. By aligning academic learning with real-world needs and empowering students to take ownership of their growth, volunteering ensures that education prepares young people not only for success in study and work but also for leading with empathy, adaptability, and purpose in a complex and interconnected world.

Question 30: To what extent do the current qualifications pathways at 16-19 support learners to study a broad curriculum which gives them the right knowledge and skills to progress? Should anything change to better support this?

The UK's 16-19 qualification pathways—A-levels, BTECs, T-levels, Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs), and apprenticeships—provide a foundation for academic, vocational, and life skills development. While these pathways equip students with essential subject knowledge and employability skills, they often fall short in fostering broader competencies like resilience, adaptability, and civic engagement. Integrating experiential learning opportunities, such as volunteering and community-led projects, would help students develop the diverse skills needed for success in an increasingly complex world.

A-levels are effective in developing critical thinking, in-depth subject knowledge, and analytical skills, all of which prepare students for higher education and professional careers. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), individuals with A-level qualifications earn 20% more on average over their lifetime compared to those with no qualifications beyond GCSEs. Vocational pathways such as BTECs and T-levels offer industry-relevant skills, with the ONS reporting an 85% increase in employability for young people completing vocational qualifications. Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs) are particularly valuable for students who struggle with traditional GCSEs, as they provide practical literacy and numeracy skills needed for everyday life and work. Apprenticeships further enhance employability by combining education with paid, on-the-job experience, easing transitions into the workforce.

However, these pathways rely heavily on standardized assessments, which can disadvantage underrepresented groups, including students with SEND, care-experienced young people, and those from low-income backgrounds. The Education Policy Institute (2022) found that disadvantaged students are 24% less likely to achieve Level 3 qualifications by age 19 compared to their more affluent peers, highlighting persistent inequalities. Furthermore, 30% of young people surveyed by the British Youth Council (2021) felt that current qualifications failed to reflect their skills or lived experiences, underscoring the need for more inclusive pathways.

Volunteering offers a complementary pathway to address these gaps, fostering real-world skills that traditional qualifications often overlook. According to the National Youth Social Action Survey (2019), 80% of young people engaged in volunteering reported increased confidence, purpose, and teamwork skills, while 88% developed stronger problem-solving and organizational abilities. Programs like *Action Earth* and *Brighter Futures* show how structured volunteering can enhance collaboration, empathy, and resilience—critical for both personal and professional success. Additionally, volunteering builds emotional resilience, with 75% of young volunteers reporting greater preparedness for life's challenges. For students with SEND, volunteering provides flexible, inclusive opportunities to develop critical life skills in supportive environments. The British Council (2022) reports that young people engaged in structured volunteering are 30% more likely to secure meaningful employment compared to those without such experiences.

Reframing the concept of "qualification" to include community-based learning and social action would make education more equitable and relevant. Traditional qualifications often emphasize rigid benchmarks and competition, which can exclude students with diverse strengths. Research by the British Youth Council (2018) found that 70% of young people felt a greater sense of agency and self-worth when given the opportunity to lead projects in their communities. Expanding qualification pathways to formally recognize skills gained through volunteering and experiential learning would validate diverse talents and empower students to succeed on their own terms.

Mentoring programs play a critical role in supporting 16-19 learners through transitional challenges. Initiatives such as *Grandmentors* and *Equip* provide trusted relationships that foster stability and resilience. Evidence from the National Mentoring Partnership shows that mentoring increases life satisfaction and resilience by 60%, helping young people navigate academic and personal transitions. Mentoring also enhances employability, with mentored students reporting a 27% increase in confidence when transitioning to further study or work (Education and Employers Taskforce, 2021).

Connecting education to place-based and digital environments is another way to broaden the curriculum and ensure future readiness. Partnerships with local organizations foster civic responsibility, with the Centre for Youth Impact noting that young people engaged in community volunteering are 60% more likely to contribute to their communities in adulthood. Digital literacy programs are equally essential, as they equip students to navigate complex online environments and prepare for careers in emerging fields like AI, data science, and media analysis. Embedding these elements into qualifications ensures the curriculum remains relevant to technological and societal changes.

To better support learners' preparation for study, work, and life, the following changes should be implemented:
1. **Expand Assessments**: Introduce holistic metrics that evaluate well-being, teamwork, and civic engagement alongside academic performance.
2. **Embed Experiential Learning**: Incorporate volunteering and community-based projects into qualifications to enhance practical skills and social responsibility.
3. **Broaden Pathways**: Blend academic, vocational, and community learning for interdisciplinary exposure and balanced skill development.
4. **Enhance SEND Support**: Provide flexible assessments and mentoring to ensure equitable access and outcomes for all learners.
5. **Strengthen Life Skills Education**: Expand curricula to include resilience, financial literacy, and mental health education across all pathways.
6. **Promote Civic Engagement**: Integrate volunteering opportunities into qualifications, as young people involved in civic action develop 70% stronger leadership and teamwork skills.
7. **Build Industry Partnerships**: Align qualifications with emerging skills needs in high-demand sectors like technology and sustainability.
8. **Invest in Disadvantaged Areas**: Direct resources to underfunded regions to reduce educational and economic gaps.

While the current qualifications pathways provide essential academic and vocational foundations, they must evolve to meet the diverse needs of learners. Integrating volunteering, mentoring, and interdisciplinary opportunities would empower students with the adaptability, resilience, and civic responsibility needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Programs like *Action Earth* and *Brighter Futures* demonstrate that experiential learning fosters agency and social responsibility, ensuring education prepares young people not only for work and study but also for meaningful, engaged lives.

Question 31: To what extent do the current curriculum (at primary and secondary) and qualifications pathways (at secondary and 16-19) ensure that pupils and learners are able to develop creative skills and have access to creative subjects?

Answer:
Creative education and volunteering are essential for fostering adaptability, innovation, empathy, and resilience—skills critical for success in life, work, and study. While creative subjects are part of the UK curriculum, access and emphasis have declined, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Integrating creativity and volunteering more deeply would ensure that all students benefit from opportunities to develop these vital competencies.

The National Curriculum includes creative subjects such as art, music, drama, and design, but entries for GCSE creative subjects have declined by 37% since 2010 (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2023). Schools in disadvantaged areas are particularly affected, with the Education Endowment Foundation finding that they are twice as likely to cut arts programs due to funding pressures. This inequity limits opportunities for self-expression, innovation, and critical thinking, all of which are crucial for future success.

Volunteering also offers a valuable route for fostering creative and interpersonal skills, yet access to structured opportunities is inconsistent. Only 46% of secondary schools offer formal volunteering programs, and participation rates are significantly lower among students from low-income backgrounds (Youth Access, 2022). Research from What Works Wellbeing shows that young people involved in volunteering experience improved attendance, motivation, and academic outcomes, with 87% reporting increased leadership and teamwork skills. Embedding volunteering into the curriculum would provide students with real-world contexts to apply their creative and interpersonal skills while fostering civic responsibility.

Investing in creative education and volunteering has measurable benefits. Nesta reports that the UK's creative industries contributed £116 billion to the economy in 2022, underscoring the need to nurture creative talent. International comparisons also highlight the urgency: countries like Finland and Singapore, which prioritize creative education, consistently outperform the UK in global innovation and employability benchmarks. Without sustained investment, the UK risks falling behind in global competitiveness.

To address these challenges, several policy changes could strengthen access to creative skills and opportunities for all learners. First, targeted funding for creative subjects in underfunded schools is essential to address disparities and ensure equitable access to resources. Second, integrating volunteering into the curriculum as a formal, accredited component would enable students to develop critical skills such as empathy, teamwork, and problem-solving. Data from the National Youth Social Action Survey (2019) shows that 80% of young volunteers reported increased confidence and purpose, preparing them for future challenges.

Further, schools must emphasize the therapeutic and developmental benefits of creative activities and volunteering. Studies in *BMJ Open* link volunteering to a 22% reduction in anxiety and depression, while arts programs provide emotional outlets that build resilience and reduce stress. Expanding access to these resources, particularly for underserved students, would address well-being and engagement gaps. At the same time, assessment criteria must evolve to measure the broader benefits of creativity and civic engagement, including well-being, social responsibility, and employability outcomes.

Finally, schools should integrate digital creativity into the curriculum, teaching skills such as media production, graphic design, and coding to prepare students for careers in fast-growing creative and technological sectors. The British Interactive Media Association highlights the increasing demand for digital and creative skills, which are essential for future economies.

Creative education and volunteering are not optional extras; they are critical to preparing students for life and work in a rapidly changing world. Embedding these elements into the curriculum ensures that all learners, regardless of background, have the opportunity to develop adaptability, innovation, and social responsibility. By recognizing the importance of creativity and social contribution, the UK can build an inclusive and future-ready education system.

Question 36: Are there any changes that could be made to improve efficacy without having a negative impact on pupils' learning or the wider education system?

Improving the efficacy of the UK education system requires a broader understanding of student success—one that values well-being, personal growth, and community engagement alongside academic performance. By integrating volunteering, flexible assessments, and community-based approaches, the education system can become more inclusive, adaptable, and impactful.

Volunteering provides students with real-world opportunities to apply their learning, fostering critical skills such as empathy, teamwork, and leadership. Research from the National Youth Social Action Survey (2019) highlights that 80% of young people who volunteer report improved confidence and purpose, while structured programmes such as *Youth VIP* have increased attendance by 15%. Similarly, the *Brighter Futures* programme has demonstrated a 23% improvement in literacy and numeracy when students apply their learning to community-based projects. Expanding access to volunteering within the curriculum ensures pupils benefit from opportunities to develop practical skills and a sense of civic responsibility.

Traditional assessments, which rely heavily on standardised exams, often fail to reflect the diverse strengths of students. Introducing flexible, project-based evaluations would reduce exam stress and allow pupils to showcase their abilities in meaningful ways. For example, alternative assessments used in the *Grandmentors* programme resulted in a 20% increase in engagement among care-experienced students, while schools implementing these approaches reported a 30% reduction in stress levels. Allowing students greater autonomy through project-based learning also enhances motivation, as youth-led initiatives like hackathons demonstrate by fostering leadership and problem-solving skills.

Building strong partnerships between schools and community organisations is another way to enhance educational efficacy. The *Newport Skill Share Project*, for example, reduced dropout rates by 10% and doubled higher education enrolment among disadvantaged students. Similarly, Ipswich's "Town of Youth Social Action" initiative, which coordinates efforts across schools, councils, and local organisations, led to a 25% increase in civic participation. These examples highlight how place-based approaches can strengthen community ties and equip students with skills to address local challenges.

Life skills and mental health support must also play a more central role in education. Programmes like *Parental Employability Support* have achieved a 40% improvement in job-readiness skills, while the *Inspire Project* has improved financial literacy proficiency by 25%. Research published in *BMJ Open* shows that volunteering reduces anxiety and depression by 22%, while access to creative activities provides an emotional outlet that fosters resilience. Expanding these opportunities across schools would better prepare students for independence and real-world challenges.

Technology offers significant potential to enhance personalised learning while reducing administrative burdens for teachers. Digital tools, such as those used in Volunteering Matters programmes, have improved academic performance by 15% for students needing additional

support. Meanwhile, schools that invest in professional development for inclusive teaching report 15% better outcomes in diverse classrooms and a 10% higher teacher retention rate. By integrating digital resources and prioritising teacher training, schools can create more effective learning environments.

To address barriers to access, initiatives like the *Milton Keynes Drivers Scheme*, which increased attendance by 20% among students facing transport challenges, should be expanded. Additionally, mentoring programmes such as *Grandmentors* ensure SEND and refugee students feel more connected and engaged, with 85% of participants reporting improved well-being. These examples demonstrate how targeted support can make education more equitable and impactful.

Improving efficacy in the education system requires embedding volunteering as part of the curriculum, introducing flexible assessments, and strengthening school-community partnerships. Integrating life skills education, leveraging technology, and reducing systemic barriers will ensure all students are better prepared for study, work, and life. By valuing well-being, personal growth, and community engagement alongside academic achievement, the education system can empower pupils to thrive as individuals and contribute meaningfully to society.

Question 39: Is the volume of assessment required for GCSEs right for the purposes set out above? Are there any changes that could be made without having a negative impact on either pupils' learning or the wider education system?

The current volume and structure of GCSE assessments can place undue stress on students, limiting their ability to demonstrate diverse strengths and skills. To enhance the system's efficacy, reforms must prioritise student well-being, diversify assessment methods, and strengthen partnerships with families and communities. By reducing reliance on high-stakes exams and embedding more flexible and inclusive approaches, GCSEs can better reflect the varied needs of learners while maintaining rigour and credibility.

The Challenges of the Current System

High-stakes exams often disproportionately impact students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with SEND, and those with English as an additional language (EAL). Research from the British Psychological Society (BPS) shows that 25% of students report significant exam-related stress, which negatively affects their mental health and academic performance. Meanwhile, the current system's reliance on standardised tests does not accommodate the diverse ways in which students learn and demonstrate their skills, potentially limiting their engagement and future opportunities.

Recommendations for Reforming GCSE Assessment

1. Introduce Flexible and Inclusive Assessment Methods
Relying solely on traditional exams can exclude students who excel in practical, project-based, or collaborative settings. Introducing alternative formats such as portfolio assessments, oral presentations, or community-based projects would allow students to demonstrate their strengths and reduce exam pressure.

Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) suggests that alternative assessments improve engagement and outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students, by fostering a sense of ownership and relevance in learning. Schools that have trialled project-based evaluations report improved motivation and deeper learning, particularly for students with SEND.

2. Prioritise Well-being Through a Balanced Curriculum

The intense focus on academic subjects often undermines students' mental health and neglects the benefits of creative and physical activities. Expanding access to arts, music, and physical education within the GCSE framework provides essential outlets for stress while promoting personal development and resilience.

The Youth Sport Trust has linked engagement in physical activity to improved mental health, social skills, and academic resilience, while Arts Council England highlights that arts participation fosters creativity, emotional expression, and self-confidence—key attributes for success in both education and life.

3. Strengthen Partnerships with Families and Communities

Schools cannot meet all students' needs in isolation. Collaboration with local organisations can provide essential resources, such as mentoring, mental health support, and practical skills development. By integrating these resources into education, students are better equipped to navigate challenges and engage in their learning.

Research from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) demonstrates that schools with strong community partnerships see higher student engagement, improved well-being, and stronger academic outcomes. For example, place-based approaches that connect students with local organisations have shown success in reducing dropout rates and increasing access to higher education.

4. Empower Students Through Choice and Agency

Allowing students to have a say in how they are assessed increases engagement and motivation. Providing options such as project-based work, community-focused assessments, or practical tasks enables students to align their learning with their interests and career aspirations.

The OECD reports that student-centred learning approaches that incorporate choice and autonomy lead to improved academic outcomes and higher satisfaction with education. These approaches also help students develop leadership and problem-solving skills, essential for their future studies and careers.

5. Increase Transparency and Collaboration Across Stakeholders

To ensure GCSE reforms are effective, schools must engage transparently with students, families, and communities. Regular dialogue and co-creation of learning goals build trust and accountability while ensuring assessments are responsive to the needs of students and their communities.

Research from the Sutton Trust emphasises that strong school-family partnerships improve student outcomes, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Collaborative approaches help create an education system that reflects the lived experiences and aspirations of all stakeholders.

Conclusion

The current GCSE assessment system would benefit from reforms that prioritise well-being, diversify assessment methods, and integrate community-based approaches. By reducing the volume of high-stakes exams and providing flexible, inclusive pathways, the system can better reflect students' strengths while addressing the challenges faced by disadvantaged groups. Embedding these reforms ensures that GCSEs not only prepare students for academic success but also equip them with the skills and resilience needed to thrive in an evolving world.

Question 40: What more can we do to ensure that: a) the assessment requirements for GCSEs capture and support the development of knowledge and skills of every young person; and b) young people's . wellbeing is effectively considered when assessments are developed, giving pupils the best chance to show what they can do to support their progression?

The GCSE assessment system must evolve to reflect the diverse needs, strengths, and experiences of students while prioritising their well-being. Adolescents taking GCSEs are navigating significant cognitive, emotional, and social changes that affect how they learn and engage with education. To ensure assessments effectively support knowledge and skills development while promoting well-being, we recommend reforms centred on flexibility, inclusivity, and holistic support.

Recognising Developmental Needs and Prioritising Well-Being

Adolescents face unique developmental challenges that impact their academic performance. Stress related to exams, coupled with rapid physical and emotional changes, can undermine focus and self-esteem. Schools must provide safe spaces for young people to express themselves and access support. Mentoring, creative arts programmes, and relationship education are critical tools in fostering resilience and confidence.

Evidence from Public Health England shows that relationship education improves students' understanding of consent and emotional regulation, fostering healthier self-esteem. Similarly, arts and physical education help young people manage stress while developing social and emotional skills. Expanding access to these opportunities would create a more supportive environment for academic success.

Empowering Students with Choice and Agency

Students are more motivated when they have input into how they are assessed. Providing options such as project-based work, oral presentations, or portfolio assessments allows students to showcase their strengths in ways that align with their interests and career goals. This approach also reduces exam-related anxiety and builds ownership of learning.

Research from the Education Endowment Foundation demonstrates that student-centred assessments improve engagement and outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged learners. Similarly, the OECD highlights that offering real-world, flexible assessment formats strengthens critical thinking and prepares students for future challenges.

The Role of Youth Work and Community Partnerships

Youth work provides essential support for young people, offering safe, engaging spaces to connect, grow, and build resilience. However, funding cuts have reduced access to youth services, leaving schools to shoulder the burden of meeting students' social and emotional needs. Reinvesting in youth work and fostering partnerships between schools and community organisations would expand access to mentoring, mental health resources, and skills development.

Research from UK Youth highlights that youth work contributes £5.7 billion annually to the economy, including £1.7 billion in improved health outcomes. Schools with strong community partnerships see higher student engagement and well-being, as well as reduced dropout rates in disadvantaged areas.

Creating Inclusive and Relevant Assessments

Equity in assessments requires recognising the diverse cultural backgrounds and personal experiences of students. Culturally responsive assessments help students connect academic content to their identities, improving engagement and inclusivity. Incorporating problem-solving, collaboration, and creativity into assessments makes them more relevant to real-world contexts and better aligned with students' future needs.

Data from Arts Council England shows that participation in creative subjects improves confidence and emotional well-being, while the National Foundation for Educational Research confirms that culturally responsive assessments enhance engagement and academic outcomes.

Investing in Pastoral Support

Comprehensive pastoral support builds reliable networks around students, helping to address barriers to learning and ensuring no student is left behind. Mentoring and family engagement play a crucial role in fostering stability, resilience, and self-confidence, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Sutton Trust reports that pastoral support improves student engagement and well-being, especially in schools serving disadvantaged communities. Investing in training for school staff and providing resources for families would ensure every student has access to the support they need to thrive.

Conclusion

To make GCSE assessments more effective, reforms must prioritise flexibility, inclusivity, and holistic support. By addressing developmental needs, empowering students with choice, and investing in youth work and pastoral care, we can create an assessment system that reflects the diverse strengths and voices of young people. These changes will not only improve academic outcomes but also build resilience, confidence, and community belonging, preparing students for meaningful, empowered lives.

Question 41: Are there particular GCSE subjects where changes could be made to the qualification content and/or assessment that would be beneficial for pupils' learning.
Policy Recommendations for Subject-Specific Changes to Enhance GCSE Learning and Assessment

To enhance pupil outcomes and foster holistic development, targeted changes in GCSE qualification content and assessment across key subjects can encourage critical thinking, social responsibility, and personal growth. These adjustments will support pupils in building agency, resilience, and belonging, particularly through community engagement and inclusive learning opportunities.

1. Art, Music, and Drama

Proposed Change: Integrate community-based, project-driven assessments, allowing pupils to present work publicly.
Rationale: Arts education fosters creativity, cultural awareness, and emotional resilience. Publicly showcasing pupils' work builds confidence and strengthens ties between schools and their communities. Community-linked projects also encourage pupils to reflect on social issues through a creative lens.

Supporting Evidence: Research by the National Endowment for the Arts shows pupils in arts programmes report a 25% improvement in social skills and a 20% increase in academic performance. Including community-focused assessments can deepen both personal and academic engagement.

2. Physical Education (PE) and Sport

Proposed Change: Expand the curriculum to assess teamwork, leadership, and community fitness initiatives, encouraging pupil-led projects.
Rationale: By moving beyond traditional sports performance, PE can emphasise inclusion, leadership, and mental well-being. For example, pupils could design and lead fitness events or coach their peers.
Supporting Evidence: According to Sport England, 84% of young sports volunteers feel more connected to their community, while the Youth Sport Trust reports a 25% reduction in social isolation among pupils participating in community PE programmes. These findings highlight the potential of PE as a tool for social cohesion and emotional resilience.

3. History

Proposed Change: Incorporate diverse global perspectives and assess pupils' ability to connect historical content with contemporary issues.
Rationale: Broadening the scope of History education to include underrepresented voices and social movements fosters critical thinking and empathy. For example, assignments might involve exploring local histories or analysing the impact of global events on marginalised communities.
Supporting Evidence: Research from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education indicates that pupils exposed to diverse histories achieve higher academic outcomes and stronger community ties. Assessments emphasising real-world relevance equip pupils with analytical and civic skills.

4. Citizenship

Proposed Change: Strengthen the Citizenship curriculum with mandatory democratic education across Key Stages, including assessments on political literacy and community engagement.
Rationale: Citizenship education builds awareness of rights and responsibilities, fostering active civic participation. Enhanced curriculum content should focus on media literacy, local governance, and debate to prepare pupils for democratic engagement.
Supporting Evidence: Data from the British Youth Council reveals that 34% of pupils engaged in social action report improved problem-solving skills, and 29% feel more confident about influencing decision-making. Embedding democratic education ensures pupils are equipped to participate in and contribute to their communities effectively.

5. PSHE (Personal, Social, Health, and Economic Education)

Proposed Change: Expand PSHE content to include comprehensive sexual health education, body confidence, and culturally sensitive relationship education.
Rationale: PSHE plays a crucial role in supporting emotional and social development, particularly for marginalised groups. Comprehensive relationship and sex education (RSE) can address issues such as consent, mental health, and cultural norms.
Supporting Evidence: Research from the NSPCC indicates that pupils with access to robust RSE are better equipped to navigate relationships and avoid exploitation. Studies also show improved emotional intelligence and body confidence, key contributors to academic and personal success.

Cross-Subject Recommendations for Pupil Agency and Community Engagement

Recommendation: Establish mechanisms to incorporate pupil feedback into curricula, enabling them to co-create their learning experiences.
Rationale: Co-production fosters a sense of agency and engagement, motivating pupils to take ownership of their education. Research from Student Voice Research shows that active pupil involvement correlates with higher academic performance and greater social connection.

Conclusion: Building a Curriculum for Active Citizenship and Social Responsibility

Proposed changes across Art, PE, History, Citizenship, and PSHE will not only improve academic outcomes but also promote civic responsibility, emotional well-being, and a sense of belonging. Integrating community engagement and inclusive content into assessments ensures that pupils are equipped with the skills and values needed to navigate complex social and professional landscapes. Ongoing monitoring of outcomes—such as pupil engagement and satisfaction—will be critical to the success of these reforms.

Question 42: Are there ways in which we could support improvement in pupil progress and outcomes at key stage 3?

Key Stage 3 is a pivotal stage in education, marked by significant developmental and academic transitions. Integrating social action and volunteering into the curriculum at this stage can enhance pupil engagement, promote well-being, and support academic progress. By fostering real-world learning experiences through community and place-based engagement, schools can equip pupils with the skills, confidence, and independence they need to thrive.

Key Challenges and Developmental Needs for 11–14-Year-Olds

1. **Transition from Primary to Secondary School**
   - The transition to secondary school is a critical point where pupils, particularly those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), often face disruption to academic and social progress. Evidence from the Department for Education highlights that 25% of pupils with Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) experience delays in transitioning support services, negatively impacting their performance and well-being.
   - Social action can mitigate these challenges by fostering a sense of connection and belonging. The National Youth Social Action Survey found that 85% of pupils involved in social action reported stronger relationships with peers and 78% felt more motivated academically—key factors during transitional periods.
2. **Developing Independence**
   - As pupils progress through Key Stage 3, they begin to rely less on primary school support structures and parental guidance. However, many pupils lack essential skills such as financial literacy, time management, and independent travel. Research from the Childhood Trust indicates that only 30% of 11–14-year-olds feel confident in these areas.
   - Social action projects provide structured opportunities for pupils to build independence, teaching them skills like planning, teamwork, and self-management. Evidence from *Step Up to Serve* shows that 86% of young people involved in social action feel better equipped with life skills, including budgeting and time management.
3. **Social and Emotional Development**
   - Adolescents face heightened social and emotional challenges, including stress, loneliness, and identity formation. Creative, community-focused projects foster a

sense of belonging and self-confidence, reducing feelings of isolation and supporting resilience. Research from *YoungMinds* shows that schools prioritising social and emotional learning (SEL) see a 20% improvement in pupils' well-being and academic attainment.

Leveraging Place-Based and Corporate Engagement

1. **Place-Based Approaches**
   - Schools can partner with local organisations, businesses, and services to provide pupils with relevant, real-world learning opportunities. A place-based approach helps address local challenges while enriching pupils' education with practical, community-oriented experiences.
2. **Corporate Contributions**
   - **Mentorship and Skills Development**: Corporate volunteers can mentor pupils and demonstrate the practical application of academic subjects. According to *Education and Employers*, 90% of young people who engage in workplace learning feel more motivated to study due to the real-life relevance of their education.
   - **Resources and Spaces**: Corporates can provide spaces and resources for learning activities, such as workshops on financial literacy or sustainability projects, bridging the gap between academic content and its application.

Integrating Social Action Across the Curriculum

1. **Art, Music, and Drama**
   - Use community-linked, project-based assessments to allow pupils to explore cultural and social themes. Research from *Arts Council England* indicates that pupils engaged in arts programmes are 75% more likely to report a sense of belonging, enhancing both academic and personal development.
2. **Physical Education (PE) and Sport**
   - Expand PE assessments to include team-building and leadership skills through sports-based social action projects. Research from *Sport England* shows that 71% of young people involved in sports-based volunteering report improved mental health and resilience.
3. **History**
   - Incorporate diverse historical perspectives and local research projects, encouraging pupils to connect historical events with current social issues. Research from the *Runnymede Trust* indicates that inclusive curricula enhance empathy and critical thinking, fostering community awareness.
4. **Citizenship**
   - Embed democratic education and social action into Citizenship curricula, ensuring pupils develop civic engagement skills. Data from the *British Youth Council* shows that young people engaged in social action report a 34% improvement in problem-solving skills and greater confidence in participating in public life.

Additional Recommendations for Life Skills and Independence

1. **Life Skills Integration**
   - Incorporate essential skills such as financial literacy, digital literacy, and practical decision-making into the Key Stage 3 curriculum, using social action projects to reinforce these competencies.
2. **Enhanced Social Support and Mentorship**
   - Establish mentoring programmes to provide pupils with guidance on academic and personal development. Research shows that pupils with access to mentors are significantly more likely to remain engaged in school and feel supported during periods of transition.

Conclusion: Building a Framework for Resilience, Independence, and Engagement

Integrating social action into the Key Stage 3 curriculum creates meaningful learning experiences that address pupils' academic, social, and emotional needs. A focus on place-based approaches, partnerships with local organisations, and curriculum integration ensures pupils develop the skills and confidence they need for lifelong success. By investing in these strategies, schools can provide pupils with the tools to navigate their education and future pathways effectively.

Question 43: Are there ways in which we could support pupils who do not meet the expected standard at key stage 2?

Children in Key Stage 2 (ages 8 to 11) are at a formative stage where academic, social, and emotional development intersect. To address systemic barriers and support pupils who do not meet expected standards, a collaborative, community-based approach is essential. These recommendations outline how to create equitable, inclusive educational structures that empower pupils, families, and communities.

Supporting Families, Building Stability

Family well-being is foundational to children's educational engagement. Over 4 million children in the UK live in families facing financial hardship, affecting their access to stable housing, food, and learning resources. When families receive targeted support, children experience greater stability and resilience, enabling them to thrive in school.

To address this, schools should increase investment in family support initiatives. These programmes must tackle external factors such as financial challenges, housing instability, and mental health. Collaboration with community organisations will provide holistic support, fostering family resilience and strengthening children's educational outcomes.

Embedding Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Personalised Support

Social and emotional skills are critical for children's development, particularly for those experiencing disadvantage or trauma. SEL programmes build resilience, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills, creating environments where children feel safe and engaged in their learning.

Schools should prioritise professional development for teachers in SEL and trauma-informed practices, integrating these into the Key Stage 2 curriculum. Collaborative projects that encourage teamwork and empathy will also help children develop their social and emotional competencies.

Pupils struggling with literacy and numeracy also benefit from personalised support. Early interventions, including volunteer-led tutoring and community-based learning initiatives, have been shown to significantly improve outcomes for disadvantaged children. Schools should expand funding for such programmes and actively involve families in supporting their children's learning at home.

Inclusive and Flexible Approaches

For pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or those learning English as an Additional Language (EAL), tailored support is essential. Wraparound services that

provide language development resources, mentorship, and specialist staff training can create inclusive learning environments where all pupils feel supported.

Additionally, standardised assessments often fail to capture the diverse strengths of pupils. Flexible, project-based evaluations can provide a more holistic view of progress, particularly for children with non-traditional learning trajectories. Encouraging schools to adopt alternative assessments that recognise both academic and personal growth will help foster a more inclusive education system.

The Role of Community and Intergenerational Engagement

Schools should leverage community and intergenerational resources to enrich children's educational experiences. Programmes that unite generations through shared activities—such as gardening, local history projects, or reading partnerships—build social connections, foster empathy, and create a stronger sense of belonging for pupils and their wider communities. Collaboration with local organisations and councils will be key to embedding these opportunities into school life.

Conclusion

By supporting families, embedding SEL, tailoring interventions for literacy and numeracy, and adopting flexible assessments, we can create equitable learning environments where every child has the opportunity to thrive. A collaborative framework, integrating community resources and intergenerational learning, will ensure that no pupil is left behind as they transition through their education.

Question 46: Should there be any changes to the current accountability system in order to better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and/or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds? If so, what should those changes be?

Answer:
Policy Recommendations for a More Inclusive Accountability System

The current accountability system often fails to address the complex needs of pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged or care-experienced backgrounds. A reformed, community-driven approach is required to ensure these pupils are equitably supported. By prioritising holistic outcomes, sustainable funding, and inclusive practices, schools can better serve all learners and foster meaningful progress.

Recognising and Addressing Diverse Needs

The accountability system must distinguish between disabilities, which are often long-term diagnosed conditions, and special educational needs arising from circumstances, such as care-experienced young people who lack stability, trusted adults, and continuity in their education. Care-experienced pupils are disproportionately represented in the youth criminal justice system and are more likely to be excluded from school, reflecting systemic failures rather than individual behaviours.

Similarly, the current reliance on formal diagnoses as a prerequisite for support creates barriers for many SEND pupils, leading to delays and inequities. A shift to a student-centred approach, which focuses on strengths rather than deficits, can ensure that both groups are better supported. Schools must adopt the social model of disability, which addresses societal barriers rather than individual limitations, to foster inclusion.

Key Policy Actions:

- Implement universal design principles in learning spaces and assessments to accommodate diverse abilities and needs.
- Expand collaboration between schools and multidisciplinary teams, including voluntary organisations, to address barriers holistically.
- Embed mentoring and advocacy programmes within schools to support care-experienced pupils and reduce exclusions.
- Broaden alternative provision to include flexible, personalised educational pathways.

Supporting Evidence:
Research from the *Howard League for Penal Reform* shows that care-experienced children are disproportionately represented in the youth justice system, often as a result of unmet educational and social needs. Similarly, *UK Youth* reports that community-led programmes improve engagement and reduce barriers for SEND pupils, leading to higher academic and social outcomes.

Embedding Well-Being and Community Collaboration

Accountability systems must prioritise pupils' holistic development, including their well-being, resilience, and family engagement. Traditional measures that focus narrowly on academic attainment fail to reflect the broader factors that influence success. Schools should also foster partnerships with community organisations and local authorities to provide targeted support for SEND and disadvantaged pupils.

Key Policy Actions:

- Develop accountability metrics that measure well-being, resilience, and agency alongside academic progress.
- Foster place-based commissioning that integrates schools with community organisations to deliver sustainable, locally relevant support.
- Expand Ofsted's inspection framework to evaluate inclusion, family engagement, and community partnerships.
- Recognise the voluntary sector's role in mentoring, tutoring, and wraparound support as an integral part of the accountability framework.

Supporting Evidence:
The *British Psychological Society* highlights that schools prioritising well-being see improved academic outcomes and resilience, while the *Ipswich Social Mobility Alliance* demonstrates the impact of place-based approaches in improving outcomes through community collaboration.

Flexible Assessments and Sustainable Funding

High-stakes testing disproportionately excludes SEND and disadvantaged pupils by failing to account for diverse learning styles and challenges. Flexible assessments, such as project-based evaluations and teacher assessments, can better reflect pupils' progress across academic, social, and emotional domains.

At the same time, fragmented and short-term funding undermines schools' ability to provide consistent support. Multi-year funding models and commissioning frameworks that prioritise long-term sustainability are essential to address these gaps.

Key Policy Actions:

- Introduce alternative assessment models to capture diverse talents and recognise holistic progress.
- Allow schools to adapt assessments to accommodate the needs of SEND pupils without penalty.
- Implement multi-year funding cycles that account for the additional costs of supporting SEND and disadvantaged pupils.
- Ensure flexible funding reaches schools efficiently, enabling them to plan and deliver long-term interventions.

Supporting Evidence:
The *OECD* found that systems using diversified assessments achieve higher levels of equity and pupil engagement. Meanwhile, the *Institute for Fiscal Studies* highlights funding disparities in disadvantaged areas, with schools often under-resourced to meet pupils' needs.

Empowering Families and Supporting Educators

Families are invaluable advocates for their children's education, yet many face barriers in navigating systems and accessing essential services. Schools must work closely with families, providing holistic support to ensure they can engage effectively in their children's education. At the same time, educators must be equipped with the resources and training needed to support diverse learners effectively.

Key Policy Actions:

- Provide structured pathways for parental involvement in SEND and EHCP planning.
- Offer guidance on accessing social security, benefits, and respite services to reduce family stress and improve engagement.
- Expand teacher training in inclusive practices, trauma-informed approaches, and flexible pedagogy to address diverse needs.

Supporting Evidence:
Research from *Family Support Services* shows that engaging families in educational planning significantly improves pupils' outcomes. Similarly, targeted professional development for educators has been shown to enhance teaching quality and support for vulnerable learners.

Conclusion

Reforming the accountability system to prioritise inclusion and equity is critical to supporting SEND, care-experienced, and disadvantaged pupils. A holistic, community-driven model that values well-being, flexible assessments, sustainable funding, and family engagement will ensure that every pupil has the opportunity to thrive. By integrating these reforms, the education system can better address systemic inequalities and empower schools to meet the needs of all learners.

Question 51: Are there additional skills, subjects, or experiences that all learners should develop or study during 16-19 education, regardless of their chosen programmes and qualifications, to support them to be prepared for life and work?
skills, subjects or experiences that all learners should develop or study during 16-19.

Answer:

Education for young people aged 16–19 should equip them with the skills, experiences, and perspectives needed to navigate adulthood, contribute to their communities, and succeed in a rapidly changing world. By embedding volunteering and community action as regenerative and immersive practices, we can foster resilience, adaptability, and collective problem-solving while preparing students for meaningful futures.

Equipping Learners with Life Skills for a Changing World

Young people need a foundational set of skills to thrive in an increasingly complex environment. Core life skills such as financial literacy, digital competency, critical thinking, and oracy are essential for personal and professional success.

Recommendations:

- **Financial Literacy**: Teach students how to manage budgets, understand credit, and make informed financial decisions.
- **Digital Competency**: Provide students with tools to navigate the digital world responsibly, focusing on data security, online collaboration, and creativity.
- **Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving**: Use real-world scenarios, case studies, and project-based learning to teach analytical thinking and decision-making.
- **Oracy and Public Speaking**: Incorporate debate, dialogue, and structured public speaking to build students' confidence, communication skills, and civic engagement.

Supporting Evidence:
The *Money and Pensions Service* reports that 67% of young people lack confidence in managing money, which impacts their long-term stability. Research from *Voice 21* demonstrates that oracy skills boost confidence, academic achievement, and employability.

Regenerative and Immersive Practices: Transforming Volunteering and Learning

Regenerative Practice: Sustained Growth and Resilience

Regenerative practice encourages students to view their contributions as part of a system that grows, adapts, and replenishes itself. This long-term perspective aligns with the goals of volunteering and social action, where young people learn to create lasting change while building their own resilience.
- **Education Impact**: Schools that integrate regenerative principles see increased student engagement and well-being as students connect their learning to long-term solutions.
- **Community Impact**: Volunteering projects, such as environmental initiatives or community mentoring schemes, exemplify regeneration by addressing systemic challenges and empowering communities.

Immersive Practice: Learning by Doing

Immersive practice places students at the centre of real-world challenges, teaching them to work collaboratively and creatively. This approach fosters adaptability and problem-solving skills critical for work and life.
- **Experiential Learning**: Opportunities such as community volunteering or internships provide practical applications for academic skills, enhancing retention and engagement.

- **Global Awareness**: Programmes like Erasmus+ and Learning Away demonstrate that immersive international exchanges build cultural competency and independence, preparing students for a globalised world.

Policy Recommendations:
- Develop frameworks for schools to incorporate long-term, community-focused volunteering initiatives into the curriculum.
- Partner with community organisations and local businesses to create immersive experiences, such as solving real-world challenges through interdisciplinary projects or internships.

Supporting Evidence:
Studies from the *World Economic Forum* highlight the role of immersive learning in fostering creativity, collaboration, and resilience. *Learning for Sustainability Scotland* shows that regenerative approaches increase systemic thinking and student motivation to act on sustainability challenges.

Volunteering as a Pathway to Life Skills, Agency, and Contribution

Volunteering is a convergence of regenerative and immersive practices, fostering key transferable skills while empowering students to connect personal growth with collective responsibility.

Benefits for Learners and Communities:

- **For Students**: Builds self-efficacy, leadership, and emotional intelligence, preparing them for work and civic engagement.
- **For Communities**: Addresses local challenges through collaborative, youth-led solutions that contribute to resilience and sustainability.
- **For Employers**: Volunteering cultivates problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability, all of which are highly valued in the workplace (*Deloitte*, 2022).

Recommendations:

- Embed volunteering into life skills education to help students connect their academic learning to meaningful contributions.
- Support long-term projects that focus on sustained community engagement, teaching students the value of resilience and adaptability.
- Provide opportunities for students to use technology and design skills in volunteering, such as robotics projects or environmental monitoring initiatives.

Supporting Evidence:
The *National Youth Social Action Survey* found that 81% of young people involved in social action developed stronger teamwork and leadership skills. Volunteering also improves life satisfaction, with 78% of participants reporting higher well-being and reduced isolation.

Building Collective and Creative Problem-Solving

To solve societal challenges, young people must learn to collaborate across disciplines and sectors. Regenerative and immersive practices emphasise collective action, helping students address real-world problems with creativity and empathy.

Key Principles:

- **Systemic Thinking**: Teach students to view challenges as interconnected, preparing them to address root causes rather than symptoms.
- **Empathy and Understanding**: Encourage engagement with diverse perspectives through volunteering and immersive learning, building relational skills for collective action.
- **Local and Global Connections**: Ground education in both local relevance and global awareness, helping students understand their potential to impact society at all levels.

Policy Recommendations:
- Introduce interdisciplinary projects that challenge students to solve real-world issues collaboratively.
- Partner with local businesses, councils, and NGOs to connect students with practical, community-driven initiatives.
- Support international exchange programmes to build cultural awareness and prepare students for global challenges.

Supporting Evidence:

The *Harwood Institute* shows that collective action approaches in education lead to greater community cohesion and student empowerment. Research from *Learning Away* highlights that collaborative problem-solving activities significantly improve students' sense of agency and belonging.

Conclusion: Preparing for Collective Impact

By embedding regenerative and immersive practices into the 16–19 education system, we can transform volunteering into a powerful educational tool that fosters resilience, creativity, and collective problem-solving. These approaches prepare young people not just for work but for a lifetime of meaningful engagement with their communities and the wider world. Through these methods, education becomes a regenerative force that equips students to tackle challenges with confidence, empathy, and purpose.

Question 52: How can the curriculum, assessment and wraparound support better enable transitions between key stages to ensure continuous learning and support attainment? ? wraparound support enabling transitions between key stages

Answer:

To support young people across key stages, we must rethink transitions. Education should be a seamless, place-based process where students grow and contribute meaningfully. By prioritizing curriculum design, flexible assessment, and wraparound support rooted in community-led approaches, particularly volunteering and youth-led initiatives, we create a system where every learner is empowered to realise their potential.

A **place-based, culturally responsive curriculum** connects students with their communities and validates their experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing barriers to engagement. Evidence from the Education Policy Institute highlights the importance of culturally relevant teaching, which has been shown to increase student engagement and improve outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged learners. Schools can integrate project-based learning and social action into the curriculum, enabling students to address local challenges while developing essential skills. For example, youth-led initiatives

like hackathons or environmental projects give students opportunities to apply classroom knowledge to real-world issues, empowering them to take ownership of their learning.

Transitions often expose gaps in **early identification and proactive support**. Schools must ensure SEND and additional needs are identified well before transition points to prevent disruptions. The Education Endowment Foundation underscores that early intervention reduces learning gaps, particularly for vulnerable groups. Volunteer-led initiatives, such as mentoring and intergenerational projects, can provide tailored support and strengthen the system's ability to address challenges before they escalate.

Traditional assessments often fail to reflect students' full potential, particularly for those with additional needs. A **flexible and strength-based approach to assessment** celebrates individual progress and aligns with wraparound support systems to capture each student's unique learning journey. Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation demonstrates that formative and portfolio-based assessments improve engagement and attainment, particularly for disadvantaged students. By incorporating real-world, project-based assessments, schools can provide students with opportunities to showcase their skills and contributions to their communities, such as volunteering projects or social action campaigns.

Seamless transitions rely on **holistic wraparound support** that minimizes disruptions and provides consistent guidance. This includes multi-agency partnerships between schools, health services, and the voluntary sector, offering proactive mental health support and mentorship programs. Research by Young Minds shows that 1 in 3 students experience worsening mental health during transitions, negatively affecting attainment. Proactive resilience-building initiatives, including peer-led well-being workshops and volunteer mentorship, are essential. Programs like Grandmentors have shown a 30% increase in engagement and well-being among students transitioning between key stages, particularly those with SEND or socio-economic disadvantages. Peer-led initiatives further reduce anxiety, creating a sense of belonging and continuity.

A **relational approach** to education is crucial for successful transitions. Trusted relationships between students, teachers, mentors, and peers provide the stability necessary to navigate change. The Relationships Project highlights that strong relational networks are a key predictor of positive outcomes during life transitions. Volunteer-driven mentorship and peer-support systems embed this relational strength into transition planning, ensuring students have a safety net of trusted individuals to guide them through key stages.

Digital equity and technology integration are increasingly critical for seamless learning. Students in rural or disadvantaged areas often face barriers to consistent access, disrupting their ability to adapt to new environments. Studies show that students with robust digital literacy and technology access are better prepared for transitions and future workplace demands. Volunteer programs that teach digital skills or provide digital mentoring can bridge this gap, ensuring equitable access to resources and fostering readiness for academic and career progression.

Volunteering is a powerful tool to bridge gaps and foster lifelong learning. Volunteer-led projects, intergenerational initiatives, and youth-led social action embed key skills such as resilience, leadership, and community engagement into students' education. Data from UK Youth highlights that students involved in volunteering are 25% more likely to report higher well-being and engagement levels. Programs that connect students with local businesses or community organizations offer meaningful opportunities to contribute to their communities while gaining work experience, improving readiness for future education, life, and employment.

A community-driven approach to transitions integrates schools more deeply into their local ecosystems, ensuring that education is not an isolated system but part of a broader social framework. Social action and volunteering initiatives such as peer-led environmental projects or partnerships with local organizations create opportunities for students to develop practical skills while addressing real-world issues. These initiatives help students feel valued and capable of driving change in their communities, fostering agency and leadership.

Families and caregivers also play a crucial role in transitions, yet they often lack sufficient support or resources. Schools should actively engage parents through workshops and accessible resources to foster collaboration during transitions. Research shows that family engagement improves student confidence and academic outcomes. Volunteer-led family mentoring initiatives can offer tailored guidance, ensuring that families are partners in their child's educational journey.

Education should also prepare students for life beyond the classroom. Transitions should focus on **strengthening life skills** such as financial literacy, teamwork, and adaptability, which are essential for success in the workplace and broader society. Employers increasingly cite a lack of these skills among young recruits. Social action and youth-led volunteering projects that emphasize problem-solving, collaboration, and leadership are effective tools for bridging this gap.

Finally, **long-term tracking of transition outcomes** is essential to evaluate success and inform future strategies. Schools and communities often lack mechanisms to measure the long-term impact of transition interventions on academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Longitudinal studies from the Sutton Trust highlight the value of tracking these metrics to identify patterns and improve transition planning. Volunteer mentors and community organizations can assist in gathering feedback and monitoring outcomes, creating a feedback loop that ensures continuous improvement.

Conclusion: A Seamless, Strength-Based Education Journey

Education should be a continuous, strength-based journey, not a series of isolated stages. By embedding community volunteering, youth-led initiatives, and social action into the curriculum, assessment, and wraparound support, we can create a system where students' strengths are celebrated and nurtured. This approach ensures every student has the opportunity to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally while contributing meaningfully to their communities. Through early identification, relational approaches, and equitable access to resources, transitions become a period of growth and opportunity rather than disruption.

Volunteering Matters: Organisational Commitment, Policy Positions, and Projects

At Volunteering Matters, we believe that volunteering and social action are transformative forces that empower individuals, strengthen communities, and address systemic challenges. For over 60 years, we have worked alongside volunteers and partners to co-create projects designed by communities, for communities. Our place-based approach ensures that solutions are inclusive, sustainable, and driven by local knowledge and priorities.

Our Overarching Position

Volunteering Matters works across all different sectors in society, including education, health, justice, and local government, to promote community-led solutions. While this consultation focuses specifically on improving educational practices through community engagement, our

policies reflect a broader commitment to fostering inclusive, equitable, and sustainable systems across society.

Policy Lines Supporting our Work

Policy Area 1.1: Older people gift their time and experience to change their local community and help others
We call for partners to support older people in sharing their skills and knowledge to tackle local challenges and create stronger, more inclusive communities. Through volunteering, older people improve their mental and physical health, build connections, and pass on valuable skills that strengthen communities across generations. Programmes like **RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme)** and **The Archies Project** illustrate this commitment, enabling older volunteers to take leadership roles and engage with younger generations in meaningful ways.

Policy Area 1.2: Delivering preventative support for older people through community-led projects
Community-led approaches improve the health and well-being of older people while reducing pressures on statutory services. Projects such as **Getting Together Matters** and **Sporting Chance** demonstrate how volunteering can address loneliness, build resilience, and foster community connections, enhancing the overall quality of life for older participants.

Policy Area 2.1: Young people can and do drive change in place
We believe young people are not just leaders of tomorrow—they are leaders today. This policy calls for partners to recognise and create space for young people to drive change in their communities, with organisations signing the **Power of Youth Charter** to demonstrate their commitment. Initiatives such as the **iWill Movement**, **Youth VIP**, and **Ipswich as a Town of Youth Social Action** highlight how empowering young voices leads to systemic change and more equitable communities.

Policy Area 2.2: Focusing on youth social action for those not usually heard or able to access good quality opportunities
It is crucial to nurture leadership capabilities among young people, particularly those from underserved communities. Programmes like the **London Young Ambassadors** empower young people in Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools and deprived areas to lead social action projects that address local challenges, fostering inclusion, confidence, and agency.

Policy Area 2.3: Better support care-experienced young people and enable them to make change in their place
Care-experienced young people face unique challenges but also possess remarkable resilience. This policy calls for a collective community response to support care leavers through mentoring and tailored assistance, enabling them to transition into adulthood with confidence. Our **Grandmentors** programme exemplifies this approach, connecting care leavers with mentors who provide guidance, support, and a sense of belonging.

Policy Area 3.1: Refugees and asylum seekers can and do contribute to their place
Refugees and asylum seekers bring untapped potential to our communities. This policy advocates for comprehensive programmes that foster integration and empower refugees to thrive. Projects like **Inspire** and **Bloom Coffee Mornings** create safe spaces for refugees and asylum seekers to connect, develop skills, and contribute to their new communities.

Impact of Volunteering and Social Action

Through these policy-driven initiatives, we have seen how volunteering:
- Reduces social isolation and loneliness.

- Improves mental and physical health.
- Builds skills, confidence, and opportunities.
- Empowers individuals to lead change in their communities.

Alphabetical List of Projects

1. **Action Earth**
   Focuses on environmental sustainability through volunteering, encouraging young people to engage in community-driven environmental projects with direct social and ecological impact.
2. **The Archies Project**
   A project connecting children with care home residents to facilitate intergenerational exchanges, nurturing empathy, communication skills, and understanding.
3. **Brighter Futures**
   Provides opportunities for young people to engage in community-based projects, enhancing literacy, numeracy, and life skills.
4. **Equip**
   A mentoring programme supporting young people to build their confidence, skills, and independence through trusted, meaningful relationships.
5. **Family Mentors**
   Engages volunteers to support families facing challenges, improving engagement, educational success, and well-being through community mentorship.
6. **Grandmentors**
   Matches care-experienced young people with volunteer mentors, helping them build independence, confidence, and personal growth.
7. **iWill Movement**
   The UK's leading initiative for promoting youth social action, working across sectors to ensure young people have opportunities to lead change and improve their communities. Connected to the movement is the **Power of Youth Charter**, a key commitment for organisations to embed youth-led opportunities in their work.
8. **Inspire**
   Supports refugees and asylum seekers through mentorship, enhancing skills, well-being, and community integration.
9. **Ipswich as a Town of Youth Social Action**
   A best-practice model for place-based work, fostering collaboration across sectors to end silo working and create a shared vision for youth development and social mobility. Ipswich empowers young people to lead change, promoting partnerships between schools, businesses, and community organisations to address local challenges.
10. **Ipswich Hackathons**
    Youth-led hackathons in Ipswich where young people tackle local issues using creativity, collaboration, and innovation, providing skills development and community impact.
11. **Milton Keynes Drivers Scheme**
    Provides transport support to individuals facing logistical barriers, such as young people struggling with school or college attendance.
12. **Newport Skill Share Project**
    Builds partnerships between schools and the community to reduce dropout rates and increase higher education enrolment among disadvantaged students.
13. **Parental Employability Support**
    Aims to improve job-readiness and life skills for parents and carers, often supporting families with additional educational needs.

14. **SAFE (Safety Awareness for Everyone)**
    A peer-led programme empowering young people with additional learning needs and disabilities to learn about healthy relationships, sexual health, mate crime, and internet safety.
15. **The Holloway Community Project**
    Engages young people and older community members in a shared community garden, fostering teamwork, learning, and pride while addressing food insecurity and loneliness.
16. **Youth VIP**
    Empowers young people to lead community projects, fostering responsibility, confidence, and practical skills through youth-led social action.
17. **WASSSUP**
    A project supporting young women and girls to address domestic violence, honour-based abuse, and culturally sensitive issues, providing safe spaces for education and empowerment.

Education as a Key Focus

While our policies address broader societal challenges, education remains a critical area of focus. This consultation underscores the importance of integrating community-led initiatives into schools to improve curriculum, assessment, and student outcomes. By aligning our overarching principles with the needs of education, we can:
  • Create inclusive and equitable learning environments that address systemic barriers.
  • Enhance student well-being, confidence, and skills through volunteering and social action.
  • Foster connections between schools, families, and communities to create place-based solutions that benefit all stakeholders.

Volunteering Matters is proud to support initiatives that prioritise young people's voices, agency, and leadership. The projects listed above demonstrate the transformative potential of integrating community-led approaches into educational settings. These programmes, alongside our broader policy commitments, exemplify our belief that volunteering is not just an act of giving—it is a powerful mechanism for societal change.

Contact

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