

# Stakeholder Briefing – Policy Makers

## Schools North East

Schools North East is a charity set up in 2007 by schools and for schools. We are a movement for change, giving a voice to all 1,150 North East schools in the national debate. Visit [schoolsnortheast.org](https://schoolsnortheast.org) for more information.

These briefings are designed to give a snapshot of the views of schools and school leaders within our network. This information is collected through a variety of means, whether through surveys, roundtables, or the regular feedback we receive from partner schools.

The views reported are those of schools in the North East, and don't necessarily represent our definitive policy position. For more information about our policy work, please visit the [policy page](#) of our website. The focus of our policy work is summarised in our [Manifesto for North East Education](#). If you are interested in further engagement with our policy work, please email [policy@schoolsnortheast.com](mailto:policy@schoolsnortheast.com). Information in this document is private and confidential and is not to be shared with any third party. This document is the intellectual property of Schools North East.

## Schools North East Advisory Board Summer 2026: Ofsted and Mission North East

### SUMMARY

Schools North East is the membership network for all 1,150 schools across the twelve North East local authorities. This note sets out what school and trust leaders told Ofsted and the Department for Education at our summer Advisory Board, and what we are asking for.

Schools North East's summer Advisory Board brought together school and trust leaders from across the region for discussions with Lee Owston, Ofsted's National Director for Education, and Joe O'Connell from the Department for Education's Mission North East team. The sessions enabled Head Teachers to share their experience of the new inspection framework and contribute to the development of Mission North East while the programme remains in its design phase.

Across both discussions, school leaders emphasised that national policy must better recognise the conditions in which North East schools operate. Schools are not seeking reduced accountability or lower expectations, but a system that distinguishes the quality of their work from the effects of deprivation, SEND pressures, health inequalities, limited specialist services and other challenges beyond the school gate.

### Our Asks

1. A sustained Ofsted communications programme for school staff, governors and parents, on the basis that report cards and evaluation grades are not comparable with the previous system.
2. Public transparency about Ofsted's inspection consistency and quality-assurance processes.
3. Independence in the complaints system, and publication of the outcome of the planned oversight trial.
4. Contextual data that influences inspection judgements rather than sitting alongside them as background, particularly for SEND provision and attendance.
5. Mission North East to concentrate on cross-government action rather than adding a further layer of school improvement.
6. Confirmation of the North East allocation for Mission North East, and of the timescale over which it runs.

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## In Depth Analysis

### *The evidence base*

The Department for Education's own RISE North East regional plan, published on 3 July 2026, records that almost a third of pupils at the end of key stage 4 in the North East are White British disadvantaged pupils, the highest proportion of any region, and that White British disadvantaged pupils in the region perform 1.6 percentage points better than the national average for that cohort, ranking joint highest with London. The plan also notes that 32.7% of pupils in the region are eligible for free school meals, the highest rate nationally, with parts of Middlesbrough and Newcastle above 40%.<sup>[1]</sup>

The same plan records key stage 2 outcomes above the national average both overall (63%) and for disadvantaged pupils (49%, one percentage point above disadvantaged pupils nationally), alongside key stage 4 attainment below it (44.1 against 46).<sup>[2]</sup> The Education Policy Institute's Annual Report 2026 finds that the North East is the only region in England where the GCSE disadvantage gap has narrowed since 2019.<sup>[3]</sup>

That pattern is the point. Where the region's schools have the most control, outcomes for disadvantaged pupils compare favourably with the rest of England. The gaps open where they have least: before reception, and after 16, where the North East and South West have the largest 16-19 disadvantage gaps in the country at 4.4 grades against a national 3.4.<sup>[4]</sup>

The pressures schools carry are correspondingly structural. Fewer than half of North East pupils with an EHCP — 49% — are educated in mainstream, against 59% nationally. Secondary absence stands at 9.2% against an England average of 8.4%, with 25.6% of pupils persistently absent against 23.4% nationally, rising to almost 40% among pupils eligible for free school meals.<sup>[5]</sup> Attendance on this scale is not principally a function of school practice. It reflects poverty, health, housing, transport and waiting times for public services.

### *Why this bears on Mission North East*

Leaders were clear that school improvement capacity already exists in the region through trusts, local authorities, collaboratives, partnerships and RISE. A programme centred on further school improvement risks duplicating that work and implying that regional inequalities originate inside schools, which the Department's own data does not support.

There was also concern about beginning with predetermined delivery strands before a full discovery process has established the problems Mission North East is seeking to address. The programme should begin with a clear diagnosis of the structural barriers affecting children and young people in the region, establish where the government can add value, and design interventions around that evidence.

The value the government can add is in the areas schools and trusts cannot reach alone in tackling the structural divide: access to health and specialist services, family support, enrichment, and shared accountability across education, health and local government. Schools are held to account for attendance, attainment and inclusion; other services are not always held equally responsible when waiting lists, staffing shortages or inadequate support affect the same children. Establishing that shared accountability, with the data sharing to support it, is the single change most likely to shift outcomes.

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Two practical points follow. Effective partnerships in the region do not always follow local-authority boundaries, particularly across the Tees Valley, and the programme should build on existing relationships rather than impose new structures. And measures of success need to extend beyond short-term attainment to access to specialist support, enrichment, parental engagement, attendance and transitions, over a timescale that survives changes of minister.

The same principle should apply to identifying the schools, trusts and other organisations whose expertise Mission North East draws upon. Ofsted judgements and attainment data alone are not sufficient measures of the strongest provision, particularly where schools are delivering highly effective inclusive practice in challenging contexts. Arrangements for identifying effective practice should be transparent, and schools should have a meaningful role in selecting the organisations and partners with which they work.

### *Inspection: the specific concerns raised*

Leaders recognised that the tone of inspection has become more professional and constructive, and welcomed reflection meetings, greater transparency during inspections and the nominee role. Three concerns remain.

- Communication has not matched the scale of the change. Report cards and evaluation grades are not comparable with the previous system, but schools, parents and the public continue to read them through the old judgements.
- Consistency between inspection teams was the single most significant concern raised, including variation in how the toolkit is interpreted and pressure to produce further evidence at very short notice late on the second day.
- The complaints system needs genuine independence. Ofsted has indicated it will trial more independent oversight during the coming academic year; we ask that the outcome be published.

Ofsted described substantial internal quality-assurance work to the Board — regional reviews, national panels, scrutiny of evidence bases and reports, inspector training, and the possibility of provisional grades changing. That work cannot build confidence in the sector while it is invisible from outside it.

There is a particular need for greater consistency and expertise in how SEND and inclusive provision are inspected. Schools with high numbers of pupils with EHCPs, additionally resourced provision or complex medical needs can experience a significant impact on headline attainment and attendance. Specialist provision, pupil mobility, medical absence and the point at which pupils join a school must be properly understood when judgements are reached. SEND achievement should be considered through pupils' starting points, curriculum access, progress and preparation for adulthood, rather than inappropriate comparison with national averages.

This will become increasingly important as government expectations around inclusion bases and wider SEND reform develop. Inspection teams must have sufficient specialist expertise to understand the provision they are evaluating, and inspector training must keep pace with changing expectations of mainstream schools.

The same contextual principle applies to attendance. The combined attendance and behaviour judgement risks obscuring strong school practice where attendance is significantly affected by deprivation, SEND, poor health, housing, transport or delays in wider public services. Schools should not be disadvantaged within the accountability system for delivering inclusive provision or serving communities facing the greatest structural barriers.

## References

- [1] Department for Education, RISE: North East regional plan, updated 3 July 2026, “Regional focus for North East” and “Attainment with a focus on English and maths”. Free school meal eligibility and White British disadvantaged attainment are 2024/25 figures. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rise-north-east/rise-north-east-regional-plan>
- [2] Department for Education, RISE: North East regional plan, 3 July 2026, “Attainment with a focus on English and maths”. Key stage 2 and key stage 4 figures are 2024/25. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rise-north-east/rise-north-east-regional-plan>
- [3] Education Policy Institute, Annual Report 2026: Regional gaps, July 2026, “Secondary school”. Figures are for 2025. EPI compares disadvantaged pupils in each region against non-disadvantaged pupils nationally. <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2026/annual-report-regional-gaps-2026/>
- [4] Education Policy Institute, Annual Report 2026: Regional gaps, July 2026, “16-19 education”. EPI cautions that regional differences in post-16 participation affect who is included in this measure. <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2026/annual-report-regional-gaps-2026/>
- [5] Department for Education, RISE: North East regional plan, 3 July 2026, “Inclusive mainstream” and “Attendance”. 2024/25 figures. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rise-north-east/rise-north-east-regional-plan>