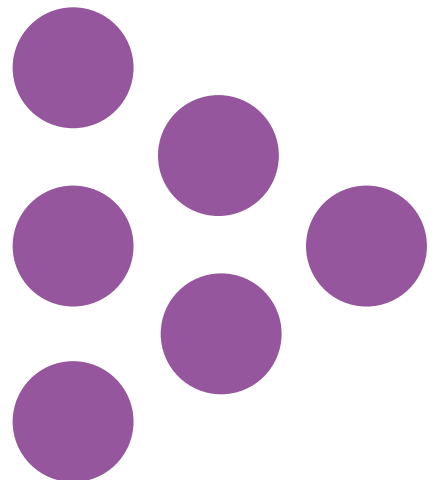

Report

Investigating the changing landscape of pupil disadvantage

Exploring the implications of the pandemic and the roll-out of Universal Credit on measures of pupil disadvantage, the attainment gap and school funding

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)



Investigating the changing landscape of pupil disadvantage

Jenna Julius and Anusha Ghosh

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Executive Summary

Key findings

The Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a sharp increase in the number of families in poverty. The number of households with children claiming Universal Credit (UC)¹ increased by two-fifths between February and May 2020. It has remained high since then and as of August 2021, it was over two-thirds higher than it had been before the pandemic, albeit this increase is partly due to the phasing out of legacy benefit schemes (DWP, 2021).

This report investigates the implications of this increase in family poverty across three areas. First, it examines the impact of recent and anticipated changes in free school meal (FSM) eligibility on state-funded mainstream schools in England. In particular, our research focuses on the extent to which both the pandemic and transitional arrangements introduced to smooth the roll-out of UC are affecting FSM eligibility. Second, it explores the implications for the measurement of the disadvantaged attainment gap (henceforth referred to as the attainment gap). Finally, it considers how government funding for schools is being targeted towards pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Eligibility for free school meals within the last six years (FSM6) is a key measure underpinning the calculation of the attainment gap as it is used to define the group of pupils who are considered to be economically 'disadvantaged' by policymakers and researchers. Throughout this report, unless stated otherwise, 'disadvantage' is used to refer to pupils who are FSM6.

Section 1: Free school meals (FSM) eligibility

Free school meals (FSM) eligible pupil: A pupil who meets the eligibility criteria for free school meals, and whose parent(s) or carer(s) makes a claim (eligibility is not determined automatically (DfE, 2018)). The FSM rate refers to the share of FSM-eligible pupils in the pupil population.

Eligible for free school meals in the last six years (FSM6) pupil: A pupil who has been eligible for free schools meals at any point in the last six years. The FSM6 rate refers to the share of FSM6 pupils in the pupil population.

Pupil premium (PP) pupil: PP pupils are considered to be 'disadvantaged' and attract additional funding for their school to improve their educational outcomes. Any pupil who is either currently FSM6, has been in the care of the local authority at any point or is from a service family is PP.

¹Who make up a large part of those living in poverty.

The transitional arrangements introduced by the Government to smooth the roll-out of UC are significantly increasing the number of FSM-eligible pupils

Ordinarily, a pupil who is eligible for FSM would not remain so if their family income improved and they no longer met the eligibility criteria. However, to smooth the rolling out of UC, the Government introduced some transitional arrangements. Under these, any pupils who are eligible for FSM at any point between April 2018 until the end of the UC roll-out (which is set to be summer 2023 at the earliest (DfE, 2021a)) will retain their FSM eligibility for this whole period and until their phase (primary or secondary) of education ends. This applies even if their family circumstances improve and they would ordinarily no longer have been eligible for FSM. The pupils who will benefit from the UC transitional arrangements are disproportionately likely to be from disadvantaged areas, and have lower attainment than their peers who are not eligible for FSM.

The Covid-19 pandemic has amplified this trend

The Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a sharp increase in the number of families in poverty, with the number of FSM eligible pupils increasing by almost 300,000 between January 2020 and 2021. Over this period, there was a 3.9 (from 17.7 per cent to 21.6 per cent) and 3.0 percentage point (from 15.9 per cent to 18.9 per cent) increase in primary and secondary FSM eligibility, respectively. In other words, FSM eligibility rates in both primary and secondary schools increased by around a fifth during 2020. As outlined below, this increase was largely among pupils who might have already been considered in need of additional support but were not previously eligible.

The pupils who became newly FSM eligible during the pandemic² were mainly from families in the lower half of the income distribution

They were disproportionately drawn from more disadvantaged areas, and from schools which were most disadvantaged (as defined by the fifth of schools with the highest FSM eligibility) before the pandemic. The newly FSM pupils who became eligible during the pandemic were also more likely to be from an ethnic minority group and have English as an additional language compared to both pupils who were already eligible for FSM in January 2020, and pupils who were not eligible for FSM in either January 2020 or January 2021. Even before becoming FSM eligible, newly FSM pupils already had significantly lower attainment than pupils who were not eligible for FSM.

This highlights that these newly eligible pupils were largely concentrated just over the borderline of FSM eligibility before the pandemic, as opposed to coming from families who had previously been more affluent. It also illustrates a key limitation of FSM eligibility, which is that it is a relatively blunt instrument to identify pupil need, as has been highlighted in previous research (e.g. Hobbs and Vignoles, 2013). Currently, it is only families who are in receipt of UC and have annual net earnings of up to £7,400 who are eligible to claim for FSM, while pupils in families earning just over this threshold would not be eligible for any support³. This threshold has not been increased for four years. This means that a number of low income families who are in need are likely to have slipped out of eligibility.

² Who were eligible for FSM in January 2021, but not in January 2020.

³ Unless they are eligible for FSM under legacy benefit schemes or protected by the UC transitional arrangements (see Section 2 for further details).

Section II: Eligibility for FSM at any point in the last six years (FSM6)

Not only is this increase in FSM eligibility of interest in its own right, but it will also impact school funding and the measurement of the attainment gap⁴ for years to come

Any pupil who is eligible for FSM at any point in the last six years (FSM6) is counted as 'disadvantaged' when interpreting pupil attainment outcomes by policymakers, researchers and schools. These pupils, alongside currently or previously looked-after children (LAC) and children from service families, are eligible for the pupil premium (PP). PP pupils attract additional funding for their school, in order to improve their attainment.

The recent increase in FSM eligibility due to the pandemic has led to a substantial increase in the FSM6 rate in primary schools, but only to a small increase in the FSM6 rate in secondary schools

Due to the pandemic, the FSM6 rate for primary schools increased by a substantial 2.2 percentage points between January 2020 and 2021 (from 22.7 per cent to 24.9 per cent). In contrast, for secondary, the FSM6 rate increased by only 0.2 percentage points (from 26.8 per cent to 27.0 per cent). The relatively small increase in the FSM6 rate in secondary is partly because a substantial chunk of the pupils in secondary schools who became eligible for FSM during the pandemic had already been eligible for FSM at some point in the past six years. This means that they were already included in the FSM6 rate before the pandemic, and so when they became FSM eligible again, this did not increase the rate. Another factor is that a large number of secondary pupils stopped being FSM6 eligible in January 2021, due to the fact that FSM eligibility rates were falling six years ago. If it had not been for the pandemic, this would have led to a decline in the FSM6 rate in secondary schools.

All things being equal⁵, the UC transitional arrangements will significantly increase the share of pupils who are FSM6 from 2023/24 onwards

The UC transitional arrangements are not affecting the share of pupils who are FSM6 now, but they will do in the future (as previously highlighted by Thomson, 2021). This is because, by definition, extending a pupil's eligibility for FSM, will also extend the amount of time they are FSM6. However, as pupils continue to be FSM6 for six years after they were last eligible for FSM, it will take six years for the introduction of the UC transitional arrangements to start impacting FSM6 rates. At this point, those treated as FSM6 will include pupils whose family circumstances may have improved more than six years ago, but whose FSM eligibility was extended under the transitional arrangements. The UC transitional arrangements will effectively mean that, for almost all pupils who are FSM eligible during the transitional period, their FSM6 status is protected until Year 11⁶.

⁴ Note that we are referring to the disadvantaged attainment gap.

⁵ It is important to note that trends in FSM and FSM6 eligibility will also depend on whether the current £7,400 income threshold used to determine FSM eligibility is uprated in-line with price and salary increases.

⁶ This follows from the fact that, due to the UC transitional arrangement, all pupils will retain their FSM status until at least the end of primary school. As they retain their FSM6 status for a further six years, all pupils will

The UC transitional arrangements will have a very important effect on FSM6 rates in future – particularly in secondary schools – given that, each year from 2023/24 onwards, the FSM6 definition will be extended by an additional year. In 2023/24, the ‘FSM6’ group will include any pupils who have been eligible for FSM in the previous seven years, rather than six years. In 2024/25, the ‘FSM6’ group will extend to any pupils who have been eligible for FSM in the previous eight years, and so forth. All things being equal, the impact on FSM6 rates will peak by 2028/29, and continue into the 2030s. The impact of this on secondary FSM6 rates will be significant: if the FSM6 status of all current pupils had been protected until Year 11, the current FSM6 rate in secondary would be a fifth larger than it currently is.

Section III: Implications for the attainment gap

The attainment of pupils who became newly FSM eligible during the pandemic is, on average, much lower than that of non-disadvantaged pupils

However, the attainment levels of the newly-eligible group are higher (although much closer) than the attainment of pupils who are already FSM. Generally speaking the longer a pupil has been disadvantaged, the lower their average attainment (as highlighted by Gorard *et al.* (2021) and Treadaway (2014)). For example, the average KS4 English and Maths attainment score of a pupil who has been eligible for FSM for at least 80 per cent of their schooling in 2019 is significantly lower than the average KS4 attainment of pupils who have been eligible for FSM for less than half of their schooling (at 0.3 standard deviations, equivalent to roughly four months of academic progress (EEF, 2021)). That said, there is substantial variability in attainment, even among pupils who are FSM6.

The changing profile of pupils (due to the pandemic and UC transitional arrangements) who are disadvantaged is likely to result in an apparent improvement in the average attainment of this group, which will make it very difficult to interpret what might be driving any changes in the attainment gap over time

The recent and anticipated increases in FSM6 rates and the composition of this group will make it even more difficult⁷ for schools, school governing bodies, researchers and policymakers to disentangle what is actually happening to the average attainment of disadvantaged pupils and the attainment gap within schools and across the education sector. The attainment gap measure is highly sensitive to changing patterns of disadvantage which will mean that it is not possible to predict exactly what impact changes in composition are having on the measurement of the gap. It will become increasingly hard to tell whether observed changes are being driven by the changing composition of the disadvantaged group, economic conditions or changes in the relative attainment of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils.

retain their FSM6 status until Year 11. There may be a small number of exceptions to this, where pupils are attending middle schools.

⁷ There is large amount of statistical noise (e.g. small sample sizes, changing composition and circumstances of cohorts) which already makes it difficult to interpret trends in attainment measures at the school level. However, recent and anticipated increases in FSM6 rates will make this even more challenging in future.

In order to target policy interventions towards the persistent gaps between young people from different backgrounds, a set of measures (which includes the existing attainment gap measure) is needed to ensure that we can accurately understand how the attainment of disadvantage pupils is evolving over time and the associated implications.

Section IV: Implications for school funding

The PP grant has not ensured that funding for disadvantaged pupils is protected over time

The value of the PP, in real terms, has been eroded since 2014/15⁸. While there was a small increase in 2020/21 and the Government is planning a further increase of 2.7 per cent in 2022/23 (DfE, 2021f), this falls well short of maintaining its value in real terms. If the PP grant had kept in line with inflation (as measured by the GDP deflator) since 2014/15, then primary and secondary schools would be receiving £160 and £127 more per PP pupil respectively in 2021, compared to what they actually receive⁹. The value of the shortfall is equivalent to the additional £145 per PP pupil, which schools are receiving via the recovery premium¹⁰ – a grant payable which schools are receiving in order to support education recovery among disadvantaged pupils following the pandemic, but this is only a temporary payment which schools will only set to receive between 2021/22 and 2023/24.

Anticipated increases in FSM6 rates will, all things being equal, increase the percentage of PP pupils who will be attracting PP funding from 2024/25

Some of the pupils who will be newly attracting PP funding from 2024/25 are pupils who have previously been eligible for FSM, but last met the eligibility criteria six or more years before. Their continued eligibility arises as a result of the UC transitional arrangements. These pupils have attainment which is, on average, much lower than the non-disadvantaged group. This suggests that the additional funding will be going towards pupils who are particularly likely to benefit from additional support.

It is important that PP funding is considered within the wider funding context

Around half of the funding which schools receive to support their disadvantaged pupils is allocated through the National Funding Formula (NFF), with the remainder coming through the PP. To get a true picture of how much funding schools are receiving for supporting their disadvantaged pupils and how this is changing, these two sources need to be looked at together. For example, the impact of the Government’s ‘levelling-up’ policy in the school funding context rather counter-intuitively means that more deprived primary and secondary schools are, on average, set to receive smaller increases in per pupil funding through the NFF compared to the least deprived schools in 2021/22. Any increase in PP funding which they receive as a result of increasing numbers of PP pupils will not be enough to offset this relative drop in funding through the NFF.

⁸ The PP maintained its value between 2011/12 and 2014/15.

⁹ This difference is set to be the same in 2022/23 given that the planned 2.7 per cent increase will only maintain the PP at its current levels, rather than restore any previous declines.

¹⁰ The recovery premium is currently set to remain in place until 2023/24. The per pupil amount will remain at £145 per primary pupil, but will increase to £290 per secondary pupil in 2022/23.

Further, the PP grant is part of the overall Government budget for schools. How an increase in PP affects the funding levels for different types of schools will depend on government decisions about whether they increase the overall amount of funding available for schools commensurately or whether the Government needs to reduce spending elsewhere in the budget to accommodate this increase.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The disadvantaged attainment gap measure will not provide a meaningful indication of how the attainment of disadvantaged pupils is changing over time. This is because it will become increasingly difficult to tell whether observed changes are being driven by the changing composition of the disadvantaged group, wider economic conditions or changes in the relative attainment of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. At a time when the composition of the disadvantaged group is changing significantly, a single measure is unlikely to be a useful metric to policymakers and others to understand what is happening to the gap. In order to target policy interventions towards the persistent gaps between young people from different backgrounds, a more meaningful set of measures is needed to ensure that we can understand how the attainment of disadvantage pupils is evolving over time.

Action for researchers and policymakers: Explore the development of a basket of measures to better understand and interpret the evolution of attainment among disadvantaged pupils and their peers. This could include considering how the attainment of disadvantaged pupils is varying according to the persistence of their disadvantage.

NFER will be holding a roundtable with policy experts and researchers in the Spring of 2022 to discuss this further.

Recommendation 2

Analysing how attainment outcomes are evolving according to the length of time a pupil has been eligible for free school meals allows for better comparison of more similar groups of disadvantaged pupils from one year to another. However, due to Universal Credit transitional arrangements, it is no longer possible to identify the length of time a pupil has been disadvantaged, based on their underlying family circumstances (i.e. they have met the underlying criteria for free school meals eligibility). Data that identifies the length of time a pupil has been disadvantaged should be collected or provided by the Government (linked to attainment at the pupil level) to ensure that policymakers and researchers are able to better interpret and evaluate changes in the attainment of disadvantaged pupils over the next decade.

Action for policymakers: The data needed to identify the length of time a pupil has been disadvantaged based on their underlying family circumstances (often referred to as the ‘persistence’ of their disadvantage) may already be held by or can be derived from information held in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Rather than ask schools to collect this information from parents, the Government should investigate whether changes in legislation in recent years, such as the Digital Economy Act (2017), could be used to identify and share this information with the Department for Education (DfE) and schools, thereby removing the current burdensome process used to collect information on FSM eligibility within schools.

Recommendation 3

Over the last decade, the value of funding targeted towards disadvantaged pupils has been eroded. The Government’s commitment to increasing the pupil premium by 2.7 per cent in 2022/23 will temporarily prevent a further decline, but will not prevent the pupil premium from being eroded further in the coming years. This is partly due to pupil premium rates not being increased in line with inflation over time. While the recovery premium¹¹ has temporarily restored some of the decline in funding for disadvantage, it is only a temporary measure and is specifically designed to help children recover from the additional negative consequences of the pandemic, rather than address underlying gaps in attainment. Relying on a temporary funding stream and one-off commitments also creates uncertainty for schools when budgeting for the future at a time where they are already facing significant financial pressures from demographic challenges, and the ongoing costs of Covid-19.

Action for Government: The Government should commit to increasing the pupil premium in line with school-level inflation over the next five years, as part of a longer-term commitment to build back better and support social mobility as we emerge from the pandemic.

Recommendation 4

The value of funding targeted towards disadvantaged pupils has been eroded in recent years because the most deprived schools have seen the smallest funding increases through the National Funding Formula. The Government’s school funding policy has resulted in the largest increases in funding being targeted to schools with more advantaged children.

Action for policymakers: To improve transparency, the Government should commit to producing an annual statement setting out how funding is being targeted towards disadvantaged pupils, through the PP grant, funding for deprivation provided through the National Funding Formula and other funding sources.

We also recommend the Government adopts a more progressive approach to NFF funding during this unprecedented time, which has affected disadvantaged pupils the most. This will help assist the most deprived schools in providing the extra support needed to help their pupils recover missed curriculum learning, and support their pupils’ wellbeing.

¹¹ The recovery premium funding is additional funding which is being provided to schools in order to support education recovery among disadvantaged pupils.

Recommendation 5

The UC transitional arrangements help to target funding towards pupils who would otherwise not be eligible for pupil premium. These pupils have significantly lower attainment than non-disadvantaged pupils, and would benefit from additional support to improve their attainment. The Government should undertake a review of pupil premium funding. This should consider whether pupil premium eligibility should be extended to those pupils who have been eligible for FSM at any point in the past. This might also explore whether the benefits of targeting more funding towards those who have been disadvantaged for longer based on their underlying family circumstances (in terms of economic deprivation) would outweigh the greater complexity involved for schools.

Action for policymakers: We recommend that the Government consults on reforming the pupil premium grant to include pupils who have previously been eligible but are not currently. This would help ensure that pupil premium support is being targeted towards all the pupils who are likely to benefit most.

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a sharp increase in the number of families in poverty. The number of households with children claiming Universal Credit (UC), who make up a large part of those living in poverty, increased by two-fifths between February and May 2020. It has remained high since then and, as of August 2021, it was over two-thirds higher than it had been before the pandemic, albeit this increase is partly due to the phasing out of legacy benefit schemes (DWP, 2021).

This increase in the number of families in poverty has led to a significant increase in the number of pupils who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) (DfE, 2021i). Further, due to transitional arrangements that are in place during the roll-out of UC, FSM pupils will remain eligible for many years, regardless of whether their circumstances change (DfE, 2018).

Not only is the increase in FSM eligibility of interest in its own right, but it will also impact school funding and the measurement of the attainment gap for years to come. Any pupil who has been eligible for FSM at any point in the last six years is considered to be a pupil premium (PP) pupil. This means that they attract additional funding for their school (currently £1,345 for every primary-age pupil and £955 for every secondary-age pupil), and will be counted as disadvantaged in measures of pupil attainment outcomes. Throughout this report, unless stated otherwise, ‘disadvantage’ is used to refer to pupils who are FSM6.

The implications of recent increases in FSM eligibility on the measurement of the disadvantaged attainment gap (henceforth referred to as the attainment gap) and school funding are of particular importance at present. This is in light of the growing body of evidence showing that the pandemic has increased educational inequalities and had profound negative impacts on children’s wellbeing and mental health (Crenna Jennings *et al.*, 2021; Howard *et al.*, 2021; Rose *et al.*, 2021, NHS Digital, 2020). However, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the attainment gap – as measured by the difference in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their more advantaged peers – appeared to be at a standstill (see Section 4.1). The evolution of the attainment gap is likely to have a substantial influence on policy and practice decisions in the coming years.

This report investigates recent and anticipated changes in FSM eligibility driven by the Covid-19 pandemic and the UC transitional arrangements in state-funded mainstream schools in England. It explores the implications for and measurement of the attainment gap, by investigating to what extent changes in the composition of the disadvantaged group may be affecting the size of the gap. Finally, our research considers how support is targeted towards disadvantaged pupils through school funding and explores whether this could be improved.

The rest of this report is structured as follows. Sections 2 and 3 explore how the pandemic and the UC transitional arrangements are impacting FSM eligibility and FSM6 respectively. Section 4 investigates how changes in FSM eligibility and FSM6 will impact the measurement of the attainment gap. Section 5 explores how funding is targeted towards disadvantaged pupils. Section 6 discusses the findings and concludes. Further details about the methodology and data sources used can be found in Appendix I.

2 Free school meals eligibility

Key findings

- Transitional arrangements which were put in place with the roll-out of UC are significantly increasing the number of FSM-eligible pupils.
- The impact of these arrangements have been amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. The number of FSM-eligible pupils increased by nearly 300,000 between 2020 and 2021.
- The pupils who became newly FSM eligible during the pandemic are concentrated in families in the lower half of the income distribution, and are disproportionately drawn from an ethnic minority background.
- The largest increases in FSM eligibility occurred in the most disadvantaged schools, and the geographic areas which were already the most disadvantaged before the pandemic.

This section explores how FSM eligibility has changed since the start of the pandemic and investigates how it is likely to evolve in the coming years. It also considers which pupils and types of schools were most affected by increases in FSM eligibility during the pandemic. This increase in FSM eligibility is not only of interest in its own right, but it will also impact school funding and the measurement of the attainment gap for years to come.

2.1 Who is eligible for free school meals?

Since April 2018, all pupils whose families are in receipt of UC and have annual net earnings of £7,400 or less are eligible to claim for FSM. This is alongside pupils who met the eligibility requirements for FSM as part of a number of legacy schemes (see DfE, 2018 for further details).

Ordinarily, a pupil who is eligible for FSM would not remain so if their family circumstances changed – for example, if their family’s annual net earnings increased above £7,400. However, to smooth the rolling out of UC, the Government introduced some transitional arrangements, so that any pupils who had been eligible for FSM at any point from April 2018 until the end of the UC roll-out (which is set to be summer 2023 at the earliest (DfE, 2021a)) would retain their FSM eligibility for this whole period and until their phase of education (primary or secondary) as of the end of the roll-out period. This applies even if their family circumstances improve and they would ordinarily no longer have been eligible for FSM. For example, a pupil in Reception who becomes eligible for FSM today will remain eligible for at least another six years, until the end of their primary phase. A Year 3 pupil who was eligible for FSM in April 2018 will, on the other hand, retain their FSM eligibility for the rest of their schooling (as they will be in secondary school by summer 2023), even if their family circumstances improve and they no longer meet the eligibility criteria. This is illustrated in Table 1 below. In contrast, a Year 3 pupil who becomes eligible for FSM in January 2024 could lose their eligibility at any point in time if their family circumstances improve.

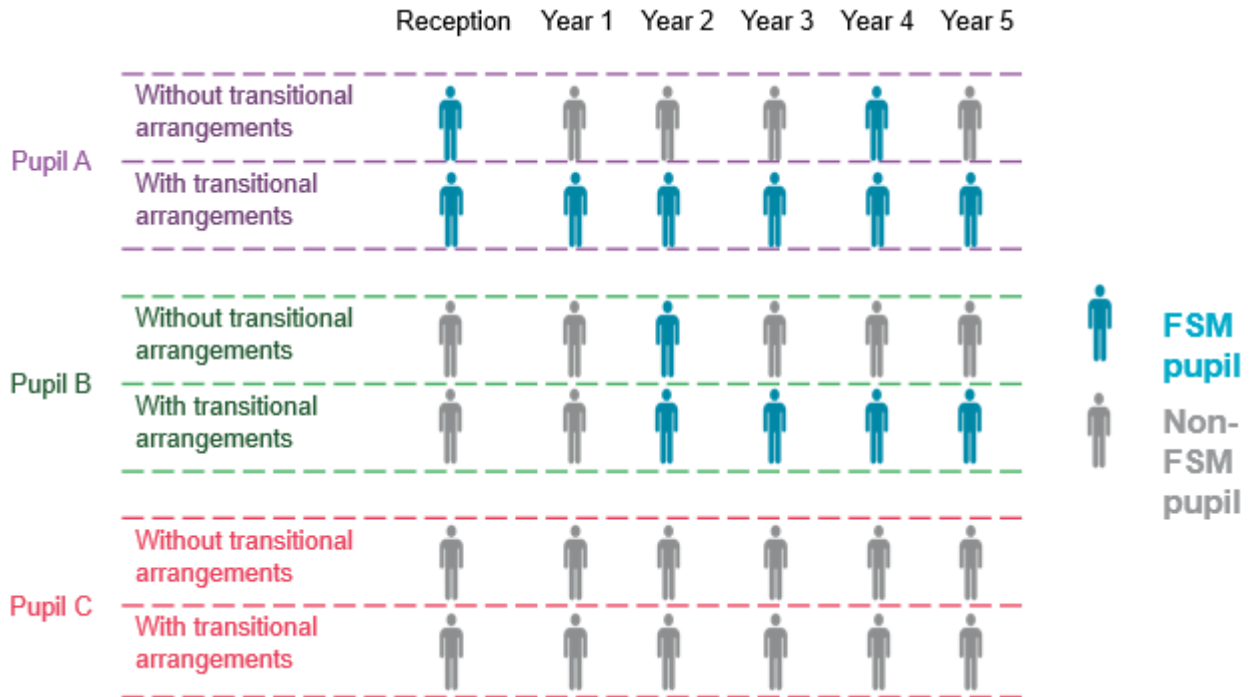
Table 1 Examples of the impact of transitional arrangements on FSM eligibility

| | Pupil who is FSM eligible in Reception in April 2018 | | Pupil who is FSM eligible in Year 3 in April 2018 | |
|-----------|--|---|---|---|
| | Before transitional arrangements | After transitional arrangements | Before transitional arrangements | After transitional arrangements |
| Reception | FSM eligible | FSM eligible | | |
| Year 1 | No longer FSM eligible | Retain FSM eligibility until end of phase (as of summer 2023) | | |
| Year 2 | | | | |
| Year 3 | | | FSM eligible | FSM eligible |
| Year 4 | | | No longer FSM eligible | Retain FSM eligibility until end of phase (as of summer 2023) |
| Year 5 | | | | |
| Year 6 | | | | |
| Year 7 | | No longer FSM eligible | | |
| Year 8 | | | | |
| Year 9 | | | | |
| Year 10 | | | | |
| Year 11 | | | | |

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, these transitional arrangements were providing a significant boost to FSM eligibility rates. This is because pupils who would have otherwise transitioned in and out of FSM eligibility are now remaining eligible for FSM, as illustrated by Figure 1. For example, 16 per cent of the Year 10 pupils who were eligible for FSM in January 2017 (the year before the transitional arrangements were put in place) were no longer eligible in January 2018. While there are exceptions (e.g. a pupil’s parents no longer choosing to take up their FSM, recording errors),

the majority of these pupils are now retaining their FSM eligibility status a year later¹² (also shown by Thomson, 2021).

Figure 1: Movement in and out of FSM eligibility, before and after transitional arrangements



Note: This figure is not intended to be representative of the typical profiles of pupils whose families became FSM eligible during the pandemic.

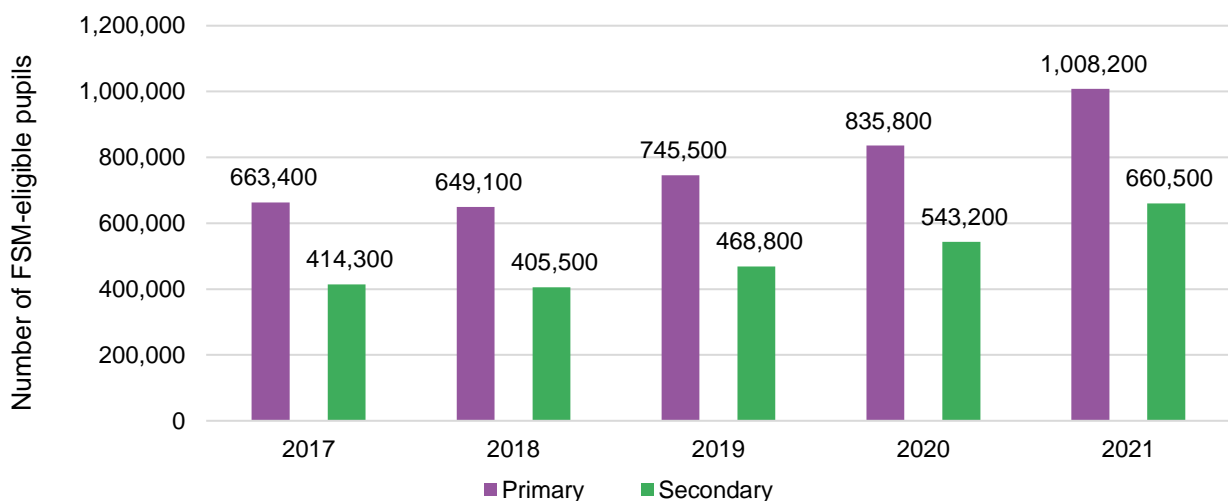
It is important to note that, alongside the transitional arrangements, the introduction of UC has led to a slight shift in the profile of families which are eligible for FSM. As shown by Joyce and Waters (2018), the introduction of UC tilted entitlements away from families with no parent in paid work or working only a small number of hours (but with other unearned income or existing assets) and towards families with at least one parent in paid work. More specifically, their research predicted that, under UC eligibility, there would be an increase in FSM eligibility among children in single-parent families.

¹² Only one per cent of the Year 10 FSM pupils stopped being FSM-eligible between January 2020 and January 2021.

2.2 What impact has the pandemic had on eligibility for free school meals?

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a rapid increase in the number of households with children on UC. While not all families who claim UC will be eligible for FSM (as discussed in Section 2.1), we find that the pandemic coincided with an acceleration in the number of primary and secondary FSM-eligible pupils between 2020 and 2021, as shown by Figure 2 below. While FSM eligibility was already increasing before the pandemic, this represents a marked increase of nearly 300,000 pupils between January 2020 and 2021.

Figure 2: Change in the number of FSM-eligible pupils between January 2017 and 2021



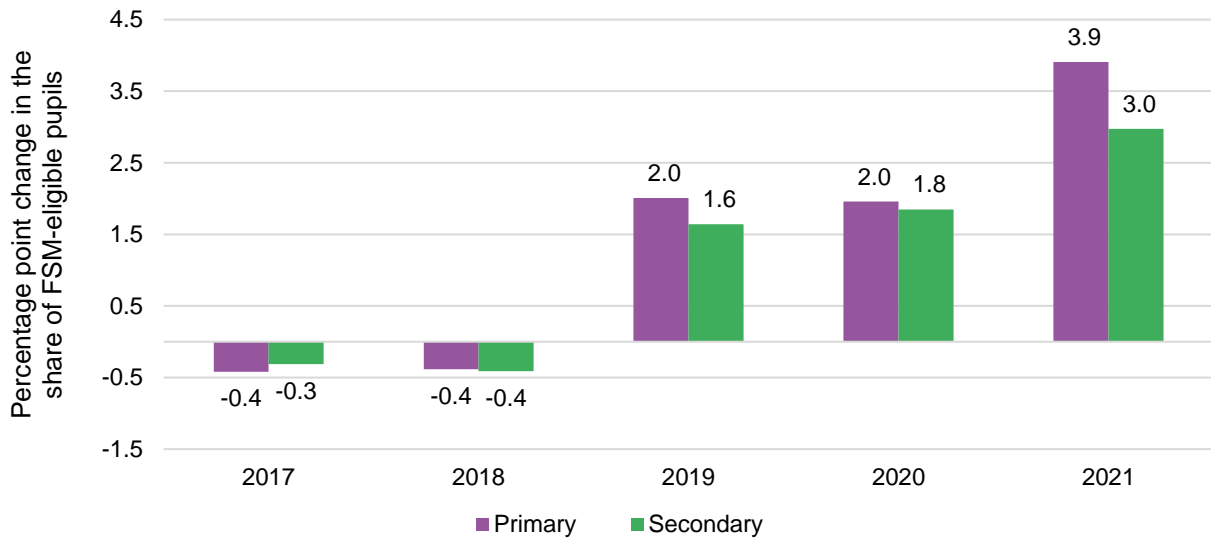
Source: NFER analysis of DfE’s Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics statistics

The increase in numbers has translated into a large increase in the FSM eligibility rates in both the primary and secondary phases. Figure 3 shows that there were 3.9 (from 17.7 per cent to 21.6 per cent) and 3.0 percentage point (from 15.9 per cent to 18.9 per cent) increases in primary and secondary FSM eligibility respectively between January 2020 and January 2021¹³. In other words, FSM eligibility rates in both primary and secondary schools increased by around a fifth throughout 2020.

The increase in FSM eligibility which is observed in the years prior to the pandemic (2019 and 2020) is down to the transitional arrangements for UC (as discussed in Section 2.1) which have meant that fewer pupils are losing their FSM eligibility than would otherwise have been expected. While transitional arrangements would have continued to increase FSM eligibility rates in January 2021, we estimate that FSM eligibility rates for primary and secondary pupils between Reception and Year 11 were around three and one percentage points higher than they would have been otherwise due to the transitional arrangements (see Appendix I for further details).

¹³ Please note that this includes pupils in all year groups, as constructed by DfE.

Figure 3: Year-on-year percentage point change in FSM eligibility between January 2017 and 2021



Source: NFER analysis of DfE’s Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics statistics

The UC transitional arrangements mean that FSM eligibility rates are likely to continue increasing for years to come, irrespective of how economic conditions evolve. The pandemic will amplify this effect. Assuming that the rate at which pupils become FSM eligible is in line with patterns before the introduction of UC in 2018, we estimate that – all else being equal – primary and secondary FSM eligibility rates for primary and secondary pupils between Reception and Year 11 will increase by around two and four percentage points in primary and secondary schools respectively between January 2021 and 2023 (see Appendix I for further details). This increase is greater in secondary because FSM eligibility rates typically decline as young people progress through school (i.e. FSM rates are lower in secondary than in primary). This means that there will be more pupils in secondary who would normally have stopped being FSM eligible but whose eligibility status is set to be maintained by the UC transitional arrangements. However, as outlined in Section 2.3 below, this increase is largely among pupils who might have previously been identified as in need of additional support due to economic disadvantage.

It is important to note that these predictions depend on how the underlying eligibility criteria for FSM eligibility (as outlined in Section 2.1) change. In particular, trends in FSM eligibility will depend on whether the current £7,400 income threshold used to determine FSM eligibility is uprated in-line with inflationary price and salary increases.

2.3 What are the characteristics of the pupils who became eligible for FSM during the pandemic?

Free school meals (FSM) eligible pupil: A pupil who meets the eligibility criteria for free school meals, and whose parent(s) or carer(s) makes a claim (eligibility is not determined automatically). The FSM rate refers to the share of FSM eligible pupils in the pupil population.

Eligible for free school meals in the last six years (FSM6) pupil: A pupil who has been eligible for free schools meals at any point in the last six years. The FSM6 rate refers to the share of FSM6 pupils in the pupil population.

Pupil premium (PP) pupil: PP pupils are considered to be ‘disadvantaged’ and attract additional funding for their school to improve their educational outcomes. Any pupil who is either currently FSM6, has been in the care of the local authority at any point or from a service family is PP.

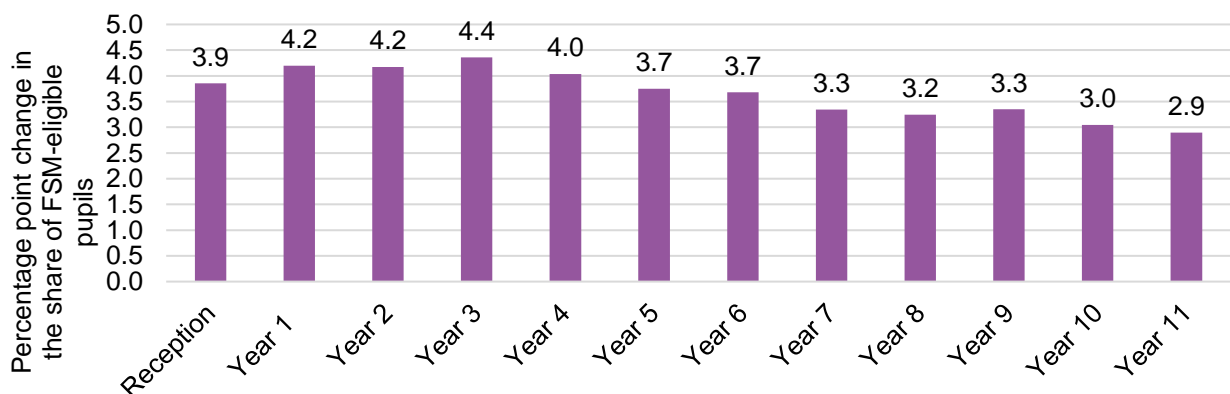
Newly FSM: A pupil who was eligible for FSM in a given year (e.g. January 2021), but was not eligible for FSM in the previous year (January 2020).

Remained FSM: A pupil who was eligible for FSM in both a given year and in the previous year (e.g. January 2020 and 2021).

Not FSM: A pupil who was neither eligible for FSM in a given year or in the previous year (e.g. January 2020 or 2021).

Figure 4 shows that the largest percentage point increases in the shares of newly-eligible FSM pupils between 2020 and 2021 were for the year groups between Reception and Year 4. One reason for this trend is that younger groups would have been in school for less time when the pandemic hit, and were less likely to already be benefitting from the UC transitional protections since April 2018 (as discussed in Section 2.1). Nevertheless, the figure shows that substantial increases in FSM eligibility were experienced across other year groups.

Figure 4: Percentage point change in FSM eligibility rate between January 2020 and January 2021, by year group

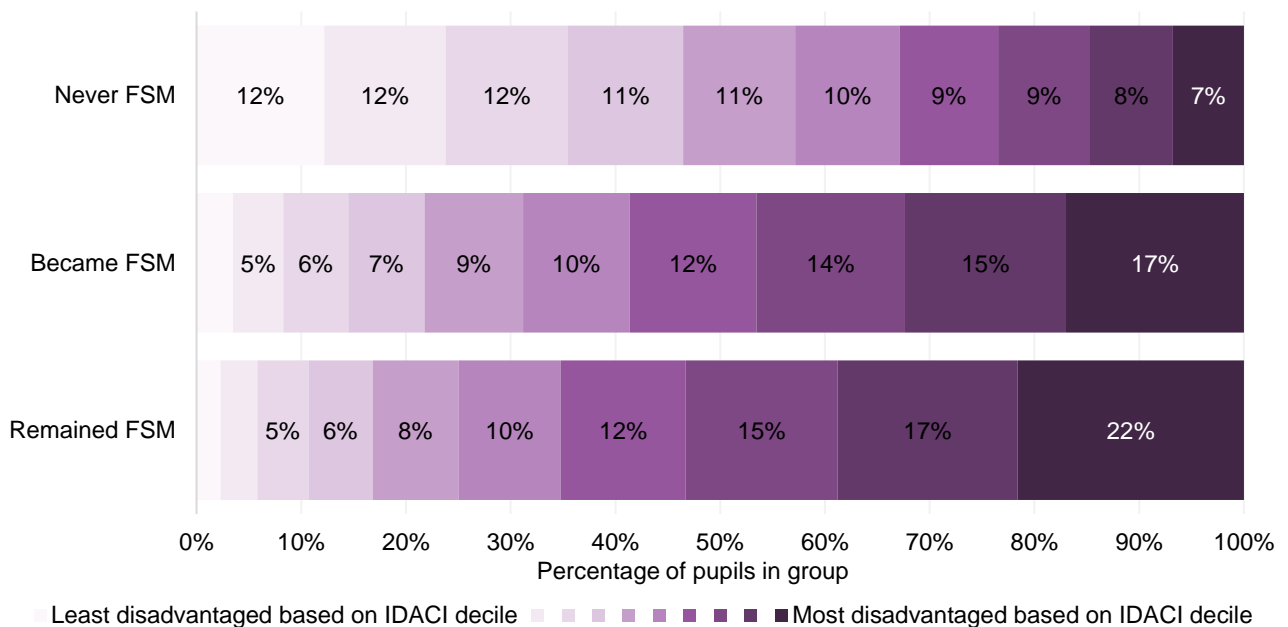


Source: NFER analysis of the National Pupil Database

Among those young people who became eligible for FSM between January 2020 and 2021 (referred to as newly FSM), a substantial share (22 per cent) had been eligible for FSM in the previous six years¹⁴. This indicates that a large proportion of the families who have been driven into poverty as a result of the pandemic had previously struggled financially. This share increases for older year groups, as there is more opportunity for older pupils to have been previously identified as FSM-eligible. For example, while almost half (44 per cent) of the pupils who became newly eligible for FSM in Year 11 had been eligible for FSM in the previous six years, only three per cent of the newly FSM eligible pupils in Year 2 had been previously eligible.

As a result, the newly-eligible FSM group have a similar (although not identical) profile to those already eligible for FSM. This can be shown by comparing the profile for how deprived the areas which the newly-eligible FSM pupils live in (based on the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) which is area-level measure for the proportion of children living in income deprived households) to those who are already eligible for FSM. This is illustrated by Figure 5 below which shows that the percentage of pupils in the newly FSM eligible group in Year 7¹⁵ from each IDACI decile is much closer to those who remained FSM eligible than those who were not eligible for FSM. Almost half (47 per cent) of the newly FSM-eligible pupils in Year 7 in January 2021 were from the three most disadvantaged deciles, compared to 53 per cent of those who remained FSM eligible and 24 per cent of those who were not FSM eligible (in either January 2020 or 2021).

Figure 5: Proportion of Year 7 pupils in each IDACI decile, by FSM status change between January 2020 and 2021



Source: NFER analysis of the National Pupil Database

Note: In some cases, percentages may not sum to totals due to rounding

¹⁴ Excludes pupils who were in Reception in 2021.

¹⁵ Please note that similar patterns hold for other year groups.

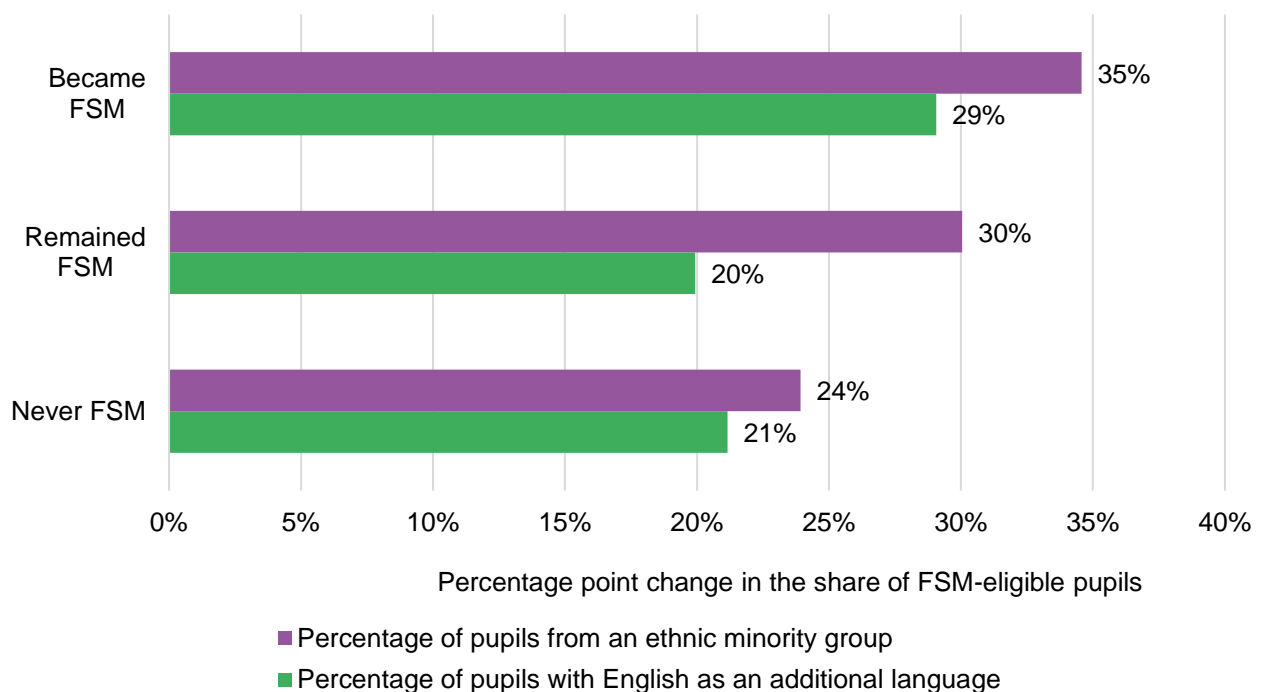
The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have pushed more pupils in families in the lower half of the income distribution to becoming eligible for FSM, by reducing their incomes below the eligibility threshold. It is important to note that similar patterns can be observed for both the 2017/18 and 2018/19 cohorts, suggesting that those who became FSM eligible during the pandemic were not significantly different from those who had become FSM eligible in previous years. In other words, our findings are not specific to the Covid-19 pandemic except in terms of the scale at which this has occurred.

This may seem surprising given evidence that some more affluent families have also been negatively impacted by the pandemic (Leslie and Shah, 2021). However, this finding is likely to reflect the fact that, although pupils in more affluent families have been impacted by the pandemic, they have not necessarily become eligible to claim FSM. Our findings are consistent with research which has shown the pandemic has led to widening disparities between people on higher and lower incomes (Fancourt *et al.*, 2021; Leslie and Shah, 2021).

However, we did identify some systematic differences between the newly eligible group and both those pupils who were already FSM eligible and those who were not eligible. The pupils who became FSM eligible in January 2021 were more likely to:

- be from an ethnic minority group
- have English as an additional language
- have slightly higher prior attainment compared to those who were already FSM eligible, but lower prior attainment than those who were not eligible for FSM.

Figure 6: Share of Year 7 pupils by first language and ethnicity, by FSM status change between January 2020 and 2021

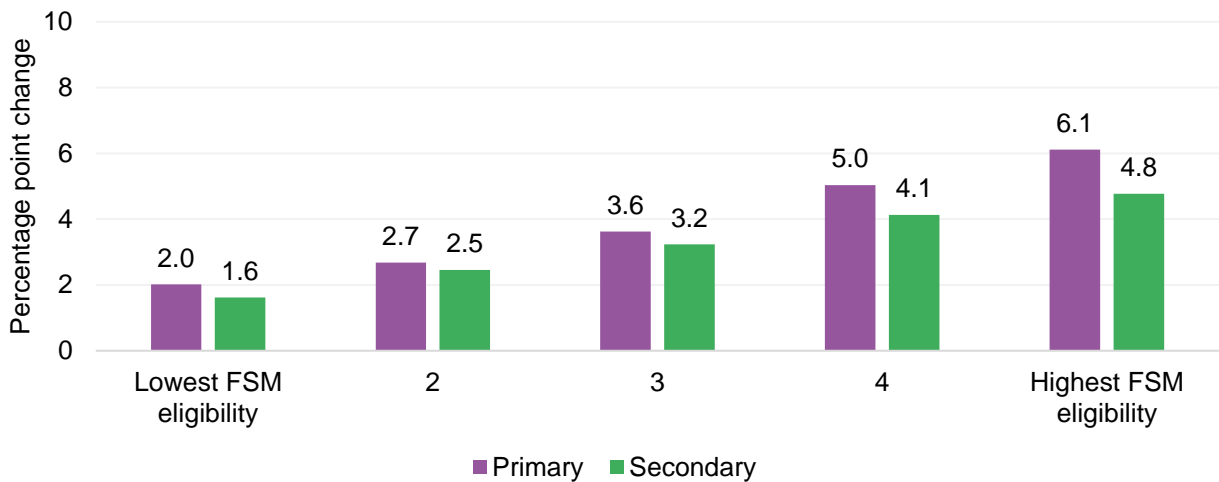


Source: NFER analysis of the National Pupil Database

2.4 What are the characteristics of the schools which have seen the largest increases in FSM eligibility during the pandemic?

Schools with higher percentages of FSM-eligible pupils prior to the pandemic have seen the largest increases in FSM eligibility during the pandemic¹⁶. As shown by Figure 7, FSM eligibility increased by 6.1 percentage points in the most deprived primary schools, compared to a 2.0 percentage point increase in the least deprived schools. The picture is much the same for secondary schools, albeit there is not such a wide dispersion. These are consistent with our analysis in Section 2.3 which showed that those young people who became eligible for FSM during the pandemic were more likely to be from lower income families.

Figure 7: Percentage point change in FSM eligibility in schools between January 2020 and January 2021, by share of FSM eligible pupils



Source: NFER analysis of the National Pupil Database

It is important to note that, while the most disadvantaged schools saw the biggest percentage point increases in FSM eligibility (on average), some of the schools which saw the biggest proportional increases in FSM eligibility during the pandemic (measured by their number of newly-FSM eligible pupils as a share of those pupils who were already eligible for FSM) were among the least disadvantaged. This means that while disadvantaged schools collectively saw the biggest increases in FSM eligible pupils, some less disadvantaged schools may also have faced particularly significant challenges in adapting provision to support their newly-disadvantaged pupils, where measures already in place to support disadvantaged pupils were limited or of a smaller scale.

In line with our other findings from Section 2.3, we also find that schools with higher proportions of pupils from ethnic minority groups, with English as an additional language and from more deprived

¹⁶ Please note that this analysis is based on FSM rates based on pupils in Reception to Year 11 only to ensure comparability across different schools.

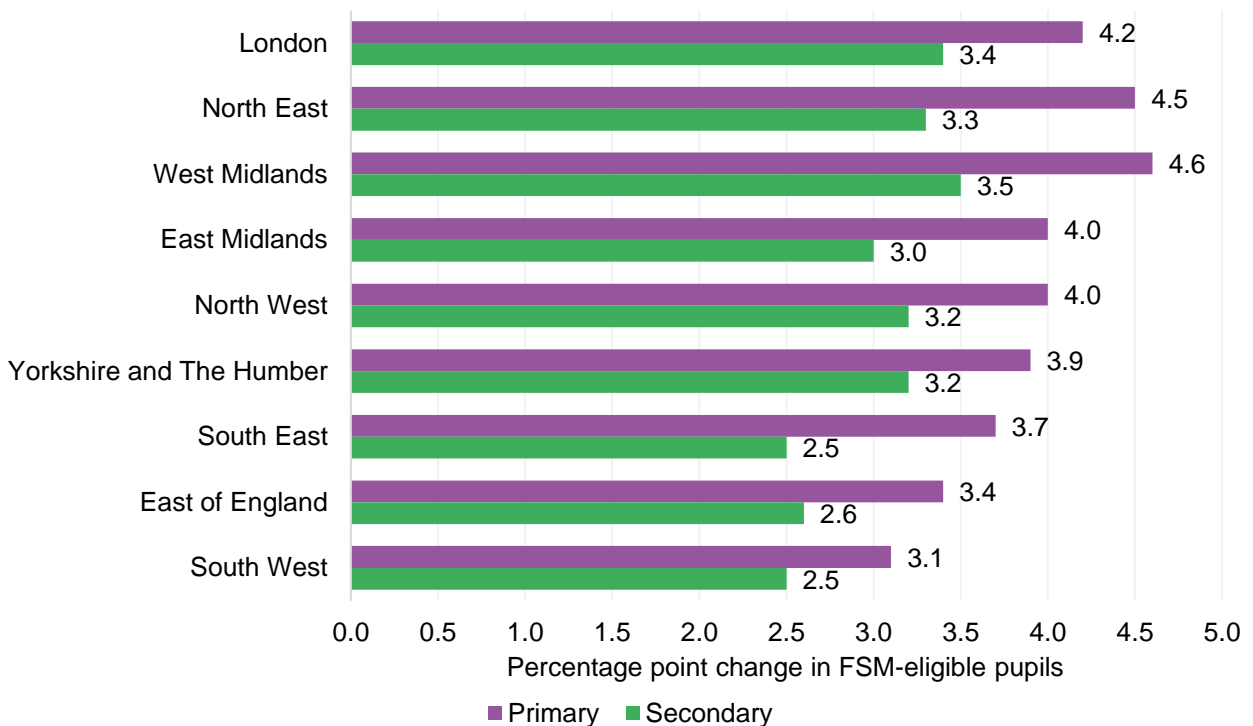
IDACI¹⁷ areas experienced the largest increases in FSM eligibility. Schools with the lowest attainment saw the largest average percentage point increases in FSM eligibility. For example, primary schools in the lowest fifth of schools in terms of KS2 scores¹⁸ saw an average increase in FSM eligibility of 5.6 percentage points between January 2020 and 2021. This is over double the increase of 2.6 percentage points in the fifth of primary schools with the highest KS2 attainment.

2.5 Which geographic areas have seen the largest increases in FSM eligibility during the pandemic?

In terms of regional differences, the North, West Midlands and London have seen the highest percentage point increases in the share of FSM-eligible pupils, as shown by Figure 8 below. These are also the regions that had the highest rates of FSM-eligible pupils before the pandemic.

Within regions, our analysis shows that there are significant differences between local authorities. In general, poorer urban areas have seen the largest increases in FSM eligibility, while more affluent rural areas have been the least affected.

Figure 8: Percentage point change in FSM eligibility between January 2020 and 2021, by region



Source: NFER analysis of the National Pupil Database

¹⁷ Index of Deprivation Affecting Children.

¹⁸ As of the exams sat in 2018/2019. Due to the fact that the latest exams were sat in 2018/19, there is lack of exam attainment data available for summer 2020.

3 Eligibility for free school meals in the last six years

Key findings

- Any pupil who is eligible for FSM at any point in the last six years (FSM6) will be eligible for PP, and will be counted as disadvantaged when interpreting pupil attainment outcomes.
- The pandemic led to a significant increase in FSM6 in primary schools, while secondary schools only saw a small increase in FSM6 rates. This is partly due to the fact that a substantial proportion of the pupils who became eligible for FSM in January 2021 in the secondary phase had already been FSM eligible at some point in the past six years; and partly due to the fact that a large share of pupils stopped being FSM6 in January 2021, as a result of falling FSM rates six years previously (before the introduction of the UC transitional measures in 2018).
- The UC transitional arrangements are not affecting the share of pupils who are FSM6 now, but they will do in the future. All things being equal, the UC transitional arrangements will significantly increase the share of pupils who are FSM6 – particularly in secondary – from 2023/24 onwards.
- The pupils who became newly FSM6 since the start of the pandemic¹⁹ were largely from families in the lower half of the income distribution.
- In general, the most deprived primary schools saw the greatest increases in FSM6 rates. For secondary schools, the patterns across schools are less clear.

3.1 What impact has the pandemic had on FSM6 rates?

Any pupil who is FSM6 will be eligible for PP, alongside currently or previously looked-after children and children from service families. PP pupils attract additional funding for their school (£1,345 for every primary-age pupil and £955 for every secondary-age pupil), and will be counted as disadvantaged when interpreting pupil attainment outcomes by policymakers, researchers and schools.

Figure 9 presents the year-on-year percentage point increase in the FSM6 rate over time. It shows that the FSM6 rate for primary schools increased by a substantial 2.2 percentage points between January 2020 and 2021 (from 22.7 per cent to 24.9 per cent)²⁰. This was particularly concentrated among pupils between Reception and Year 4. In contrast, for secondary, the FSM6 rate increased by only 0.2 percentage points (from 26.8 per cent to 27.0 per cent), despite the fact that FSM eligibility rates increased sharply in secondary due to the pandemic.

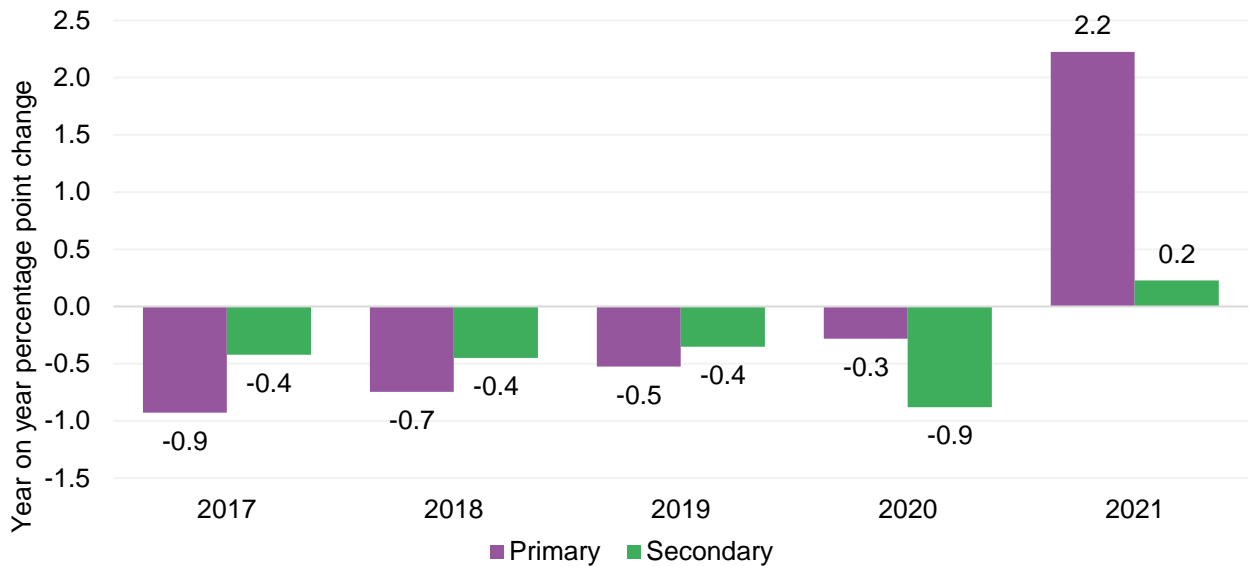
¹⁹ This refers to pupils who became eligible for FSM in January 2021, but were not eligible for FSM at any point in the previous six years.

²⁰ Please note that this rate is based on pupils between Reception and Year 11.

This amounts to an increase in the number of FSM6 pupils of over 100,000 between January 2020 and 2021.

The fact that there was only a small increase in the FSM6 rate in secondary in 2021 may seem surprising given the substantial increase observed in the FSM eligibility rate (see Section 2). This finding can partly be explained by the fact that a significant proportion of secondary pupils had already been FSM eligible in the last six years, and so did not see a change in their FSM6 status. For example, 44 per cent of the pupils in Year 11 in 2021 who became newly FSM eligible were already FSM6.

Figure 9: Year-on-year percentage point change in FSM6 rates between January 2016 and 2021



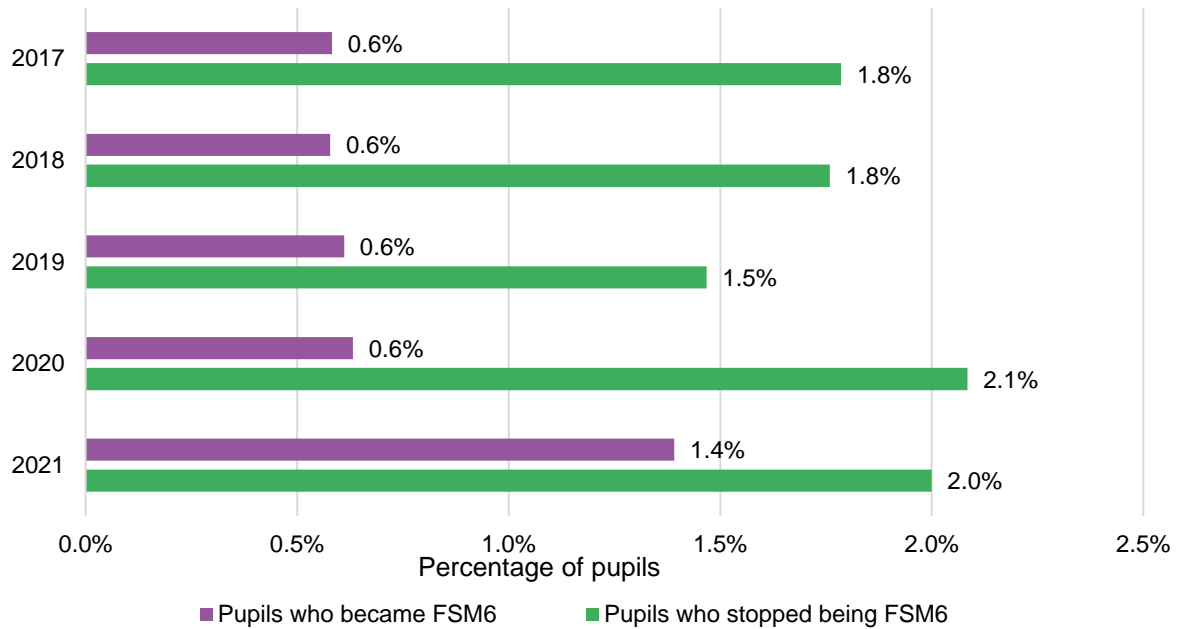
Source: NFER analysis of the National Pupil Database

This finding can also be explained by the fact that substantial share of pupils in the secondary year groups stopped being FSM6 in January 2021. This means that the pandemic prevented a decline in secondary school FSM6 rates in keeping with the downward trend of previous years.

This is shown by Figure 10 which illustrates that there were particularly large outflows of pupils from FSM6 in 2020 and 2021 in Year 11, due to declining FSM eligibility rates six years ago. The figure also shows that, despite the significant increase in pupils becoming FSM in Year 11 in 2021, this was still not sufficient to prevent a net outflow in FSM6 in Year 11. While there was still an overall increase in FSM6 rates in secondary because inflows outweighed outflows in other year groups, these findings demonstrates that the outflows from FSM6 in 2021 were substantial.

As pupils maintain their FSM6 status for six years, the pandemic has also meant that, all things being equal, FSM6 rates in primary and secondary will continue to be at a higher level than they would have otherwise been over the next six years.

Figure 10: Movement in and out of FSM6 for Year 11 cohort, between January 2017 and January 2021



Source: NFER analysis of the National Pupil Database

It is important to note that the UC transitional arrangements highlighted in Section 2 are not currently affecting FSM6 rates. This is because, by definition, extending a pupil’s eligibility for FSM, will also extend the amount of time they are FSM6. However, as FSM6 pupils continue to be FSM6 for six years after they were last eligible for FSM, it will take six years for the introduction of the UC transitional arrangement to start impacting FSM6 rates.

All else being equal, the transitional arrangements will lead to substantial increases in FSM6 rates from 2023/24 onwards, particularly in secondary schools. Due to the transitional arrangements, all pupils who were FSM eligible in April 2018 or who became FSM eligible before the end of the UC roll-out (which is set to be summer 2023 at the earliest (DfE, 2021a)) will remain eligible for FSM until at least the end of primary school²¹. Rather than remaining eligible for FSM6 for six years, these pupils will remain FSM6 until the end of Year 11 (for up to 12 years).

This is illustrated by Table 2 below, which considers the case of a reception pupil whose family became eligible for FSM in 2017/18, but whose family circumstances improved in the following year. Before the transitional arrangements, that pupil would lose their FSM eligibility status in the following year but remain FSM6 until Year 5. Now, due to the transitional arrangements, that pupil will remain FSM until Year 6, and so retain their FSM6 status until Year 11.

²¹ There will be a small number of exceptions where pupils are attending middle schools.

Table 2 Example of the impact of UC transitional arrangements on FSM6

| | Before UC transitional arrangements | | After UC transitional arrangements | |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| | Eligible for free school meals | Eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years | Eligible for free school meals | Eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years |
| Reception | FSM eligible | Retain FSM6 status for six years | FSM eligible | Retain FSM6 status for twelve years |
| Year 1 | No longer FSM eligible | | Retain FSM eligibility until end of phase | |
| Year 2 | | | | |
| Year 3 | | | | |
| Year 4 | | | | |
| Year 5 | | | | |
| Year 6 | | No longer FSM6 | | |
| Year 7 | | | No longer FSM eligible | |
| Year 8 | | | | |
| Year 9 | | | | |
| Year 10 | | | | |
| Year 11 | | | | |

This will have a very important effect on FSM6 rates given that, each year from 2023/24 onwards, the FSM6 group will be extended by an additional year. In 2023/24, the 'FSM6' group will include any pupils who have been eligible for FSM in the previous seven years, rather than six years. In 2024/25, this will extend to any pupils who have been eligible for FSM in the previous eight years, rather than six years. In 2025/26, this will extend to any pupils who have been eligible for FSM in

the previous nine years, and so forth. Whilst impacts are set to continue until at least 2034/35²², the effect will peak in 2028/29.

The impact of this on FSM6 rates will be significant: if the FSM6 status of all current pupils had been protected throughout their schooling, the current FSM6 rate in secondary would be a fifth larger (based on a six percentage point increase from the current FSM6 rate of 27.0 per cent) than it currently is. This increase will be largest for Year 11 pupils: the current FSM6 rate in Year 11 would be nine percentage points higher than it currently is, if the FSM6 status of all current pupils had been protected throughout their schooling.

As these changes will happen gradually, it will be particularly difficult to interpret changes in FSM6 rates both within and between cohorts from 2023/24 onwards. It is important to note that the pupils who will have their FSM6 status extended are a group of pupils who have lower attainment compared to pupils who are not disadvantaged. This is discussed further in Section 4.

3.2 What are the characteristics of the pupils and schools which have seen the largest increases in FSM6 rates during the pandemic?

The pupils that became newly FSM6 during the pandemic (i.e. pupils who were FSM6 in January 2021, but not in the last six years) are a sub-set of those pupils who became FSM eligible during the pandemic, discussed above in Section 2.3. As a result, the characteristics of those pupils who became newly FSM6 are largely similar to those who become newly FSM.

For primary schools, the characteristics of the schools which saw the largest percentage point change in FSM6 rates are largely similar to those observed for FSM eligibility in Section 2.4. More deprived primary schools, primary schools with lower attainment, primary schools with higher shares of pupils from ethnic minority groups and primary schools with higher shares of pupils with English as an additional language all experienced higher increases in FSM6 rates.

For secondary schools, the patterns across schools are less clear. While it is still the case that more deprived schools generally saw larger increases in FSM6 rates, there are a number of deprived schools seeing declines in FSM6 rates, reflecting the relatively large share of pupils who stopped being FSM6 in January 2021. Indeed, there are over 490 secondary schools which saw a decline in their FSM6 rates between January 2020 and 2021 despite seeing both an increase in their FSM eligibility rate, and in the rate of pupils who had been eligible for FSM in any previous year.

3.3 Which geographic areas have seen the largest increases in FSM6 rates during the pandemic?

As with FSM, traditionally disadvantaged areas such as London, the North East and the Midlands saw the highest percentage point increases in FSM6 rates at primary. At secondary, the pattern is less clear in the case of London, which saw a relatively large increase in FSM eligibility rates, but

²² This will depend on exactly when the roll-out of the UC transitional arrangements is completed.

declining FSM6 rates. Again, this pattern reflects the impact of falling FSM eligibility rates six years ago.

Figure 11: Percentage point change in FSM6 status between January 2020 and 2021, by region



Source: NFER analysis of the National Pupil Database

4 Implications for the attainment gap

Key findings

- Pupil attainment varies with the persistence of a pupil’s FSM eligibility (as measured by the length of time spent eligible for FSM). The longer the length of time pupils are identified as being FSM eligible, the lower their average attainment.
- A pupil who becomes newly FSM eligible will, on average, have significantly lower attainment compared to pupils who are not eligible for FSM, but higher (albeit closer) attainment to those pupils who are already FSM. All else being equal, as the number of pupils who are FSM eligible or FSM6 increases, the average attainment for disadvantaged pupils as a whole is therefore likely to appear to improve.
- Given that the attainment gap is measured using FSM6 status, the measurement of the attainment gap has always varied with both changes in attainment and changing patterns in the disadvantaged pupil population. However, substantial recent and anticipated increases in FSM6 rates in the short-term (due to the pandemic) and medium-term (due to the UC transitional arrangements) will make the measured attainment gap increasingly difficult to interpret. It will not be possible to tell whether observed changes are being driven by changing patterns of disadvantage due to UC transitional arrangements or to changes in relative attainment. In order to target policy interventions towards the persistent gaps between young people from different backgrounds, a meaningful set of measures (which includes the existing measure of the attainment gap) is needed to ensure that we can understand how and why the attainment of disadvantage pupils is evolving over time.
- Analysing how attainment outcomes are evolving according to the length of time a pupil has been disadvantaged allows for the comparison of more similar groups of pupils.
- However, due to UC transitional arrangements, information on the length of time a pupil has been disadvantaged (in terms of their underlying family circumstances) is no longer available. Data identifying the length of time a pupil has been disadvantaged needs to be recorded now or provided by the Government²³ to ensure that policymakers, school leaders and researchers are able to better interpret and evaluate trends and changes in the attainment of disadvantaged pupils over the next decade.

This section investigates how the measurement of the attainment gap might be impacted by recent and anticipated changes to the number of pupils eligible for FSM6, even if the underlying attainment of each pupil remains unchanged. This is to investigate the extent to which changes in FSM6 rates influence the measurement of the attainment gap and its interpretation.

²³ Where it can be identified via data collected by the DWP.

It is important to recognise that our analysis does not seek to establish how the attainment gap has changed since the start of the pandemic, but instead focuses on the extent to which changes in disadvantaged status may be affecting the measurement of the gap.

4.1 How was the attainment gap evolving before the pandemic?

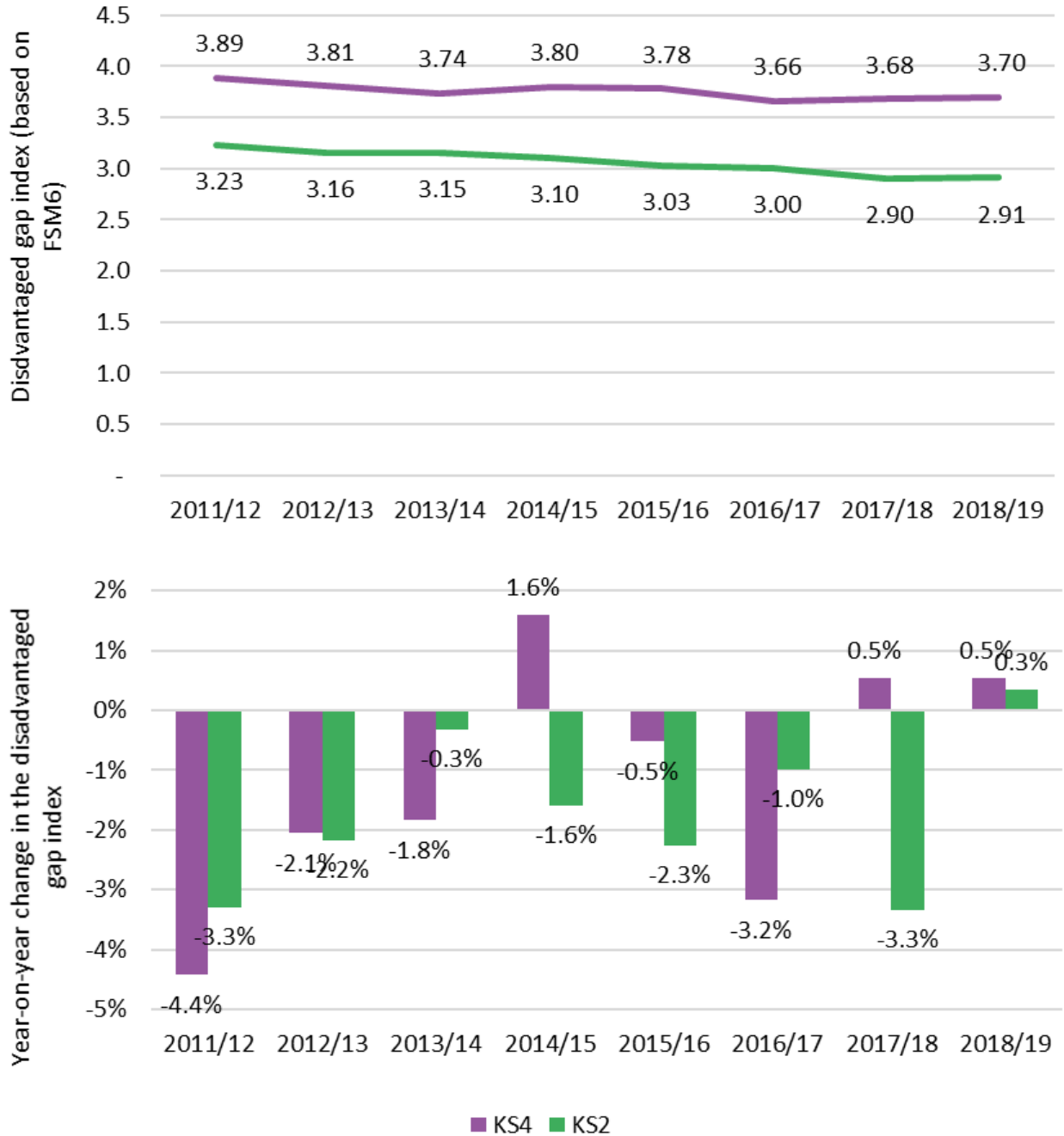
The attainment gap is measured as the difference in the average rank of pupils in the non-disadvantaged group and the average rank of pupils in the disadvantaged group (see DfE, 2014 for further details). Eligibility for free school meals at any point in the last six years is a key measure underpinning the calculation of the attainment gap as it is used to define the group of pupils who are considered to be ‘disadvantaged’ (DfE, 2014).

Figure 12 presents the evolution of the KS2 and KS4 attainment gap index since the introduction of the PP in 2011/12 up to 2018/19 (which is the last year that standardised assessments were sat by pupils). The figure shows that, up to 2016/17 the disadvantaged attainment gap measure suggests that the gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their more advantaged peers was closing. However, since 2016/17, the attainment gap has stayed the same and, if anything, has shown some signs of widening for KS4.

In terms of what has happened to the attainment gap since 2018/19, there is growing evidence that the pandemic has had a larger negative impact on the attainment of disadvantaged pupils than their more advantaged peers (see Rose *et al.*, 2021; DfE, 2021k). With continued concerns about the impact that the pandemic has on pupil attainment, the evolution of the attainment gap is likely to attract continued interest in the coming years and, be an important measure to inform both policy and practice decisions. Both the KS2 and KS4 attainment gaps are key priority outcomes for the Government over this parliament (HM Treasury, 2021b).

However, the patterns described above should be treated with caution as, while the attainment gap is used typically to track how the attainment of disadvantaged pupils is evolving over time, the reported disadvantage gap for any given year reflects that cohort of pupils and the composition of the groups defined as disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged. Therefore, year-on-year changes could be driven by differences in cohort characteristics rather than any improvement or decline in pupil attainment. We expand on this further in the following sections by showing that, even within a cohort, variation in the pupils who are considered to be disadvantaged can lead to substantial changes in the measurement of the attainment gap.

Figure 12: KS2 and KS4 attainment gap index, 2010/11 to 2018/19



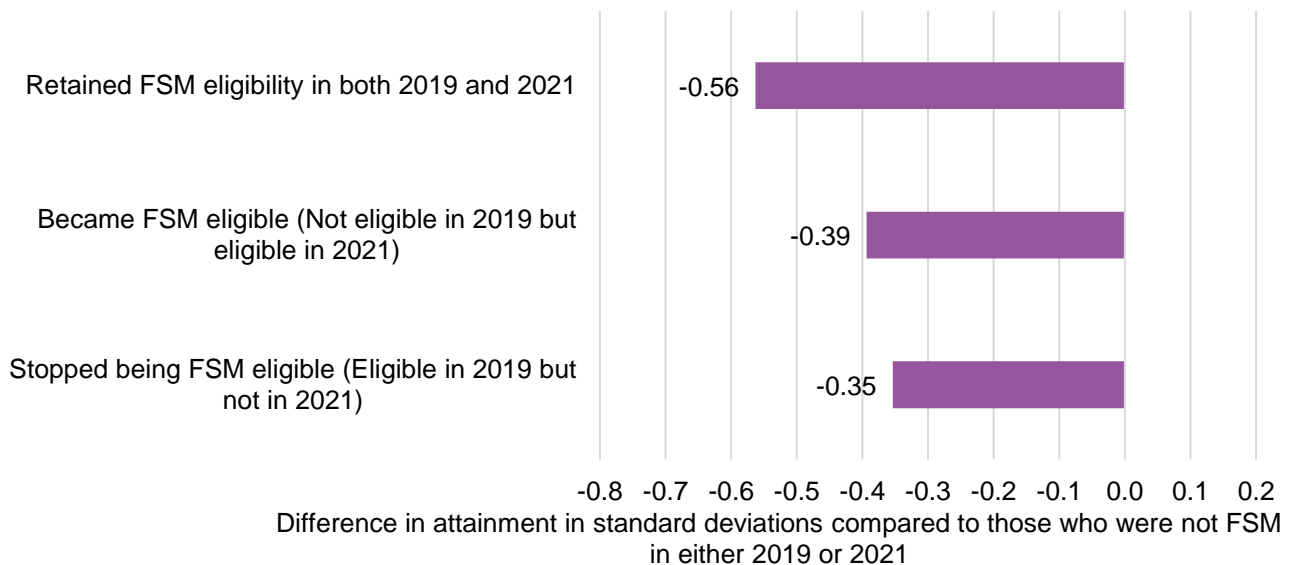
Source: NFER analysis of DfE KS2 (DfE, 2021j) and KS4 (DfE, 2021c) attainment data

4.2 How does attainment vary by disadvantaged status?

Figure 13 presents differences in KS2 attainment (based on standardised average KS2 point score across English, writing and maths) for different groups of pupils compared to those pupils who were never FSM eligible. In context, the Education Endowment Foundation translates a difference in attainment of between 0.06 and 0.09 standard deviations into roughly one-month worth of academic progress (EEF, 2021). In other words, the -0.56 difference in KS2 attainment between those who retained their FSM eligibility between 2019 and 2021 compared to those were not FSM eligible in either year indicates that their KS2 attainment was approximately seven months of academic progress behind.

The figure shows that, as highlighted in Section 2.3, those individuals who became FSM, between 2019 and 2021, tended to have KS2 attainment which was lower than those pupils who were not eligible for FSM, but slightly higher than those pupils who were already FSM²⁴. Further, it shows that pupils who are no longer FSM still have attainment which is much lower than those pupils who have never been identified as eligible for FSM.

Figure 13: Difference in 2018/19 KS2 attainment (in standard deviations) compared to those who were not FSM eligible in either 2019 or 2021, by FSM status



Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database

Note: Change presented using KS2 attainment in 2019. Change in FSM eligibility and FSM6 status measured in January 2019 and January 2021.

There are also observable differences in the attainment of individuals by the length of time they have been FSM. This shown by Table 3 below which presents standardised differences (measured in standard deviations) in the KS2 and KS4 attainment for different groups of pupils compared to the attainment of pupils who have never been FSM. In general, the longer a pupil has been

²⁴ This difference is statistically significant.

disadvantaged, the lower their attainment²⁵ (as highlighted by Gorard *et al.* (2021) and Treadaway (2014)). Table 3 illustrates that the FSM/FSM6 group is not a homogenous group. On average, the longer a pupil has been disadvantaged, the lower their attainment. Therefore, as pupils move in and out of FSM/FSM6, this will impact on the average attainment of this group.

Table 3 also shows that pupils who have been FSM at any point in time, even if this is more than six years ago, have significantly lower attainment on average than those who have never been FSM.

Table 3 Difference in KS2 and KS4 attainment (in standard deviations) in 2018/19 compared to pupils who have never been FSM, by length and share of schooling spent disadvantaged

| | Average KS2 attainment in 2018/19 | Average KS4 attainment in 2018/19 |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>By number of years eligible for FSM</i> | | |
| 0 | Comparison group | |
| 1 | -0.31 | -0.40 |
| 2 | -0.36 | -0.45 |
| 3 | -0.38 | -0.50 |
| 4 | -0.45 | -0.54 |
| 5 | -0.49 | -0.56 |
| 6 | -0.57 | -0.60 |
| 7 | -0.66 | -0.61 |
| 8 | - | -0.70 |
| 9 | - | -0.73 |
| 10 | - | -0.76 |
| 11 | - | -0.84 |
| 12 | - | -0.85 |
| <i>By whether identified as FSM6</i> | | |
| Never identified as FSM6 | Comparison group | |
| Currently FSM6 | -0.48 | -0.66 |
| Previously FSM6 | -0.26 | -0.46 |

²⁵ It is worth noting that the average attainment figures shown in Table 3 will have been impacted by the UC transitional arrangements. If anything, our analysis will under-estimate the variation between the number of times a pupil is FSM eligible and their attainment. This is because the UC transitional arrangements will increase the length of time over which a pupil is identified as being FSM.

| By share of schooling spent FSM | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------|-------|
| 0% | Comparison group | |
| 1% to 50% | -0.32 | -0.49 |
| 51% to 80% | -0.46 | -0.67 |
| More than 80% | -0.66 | -0.83 |

Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database

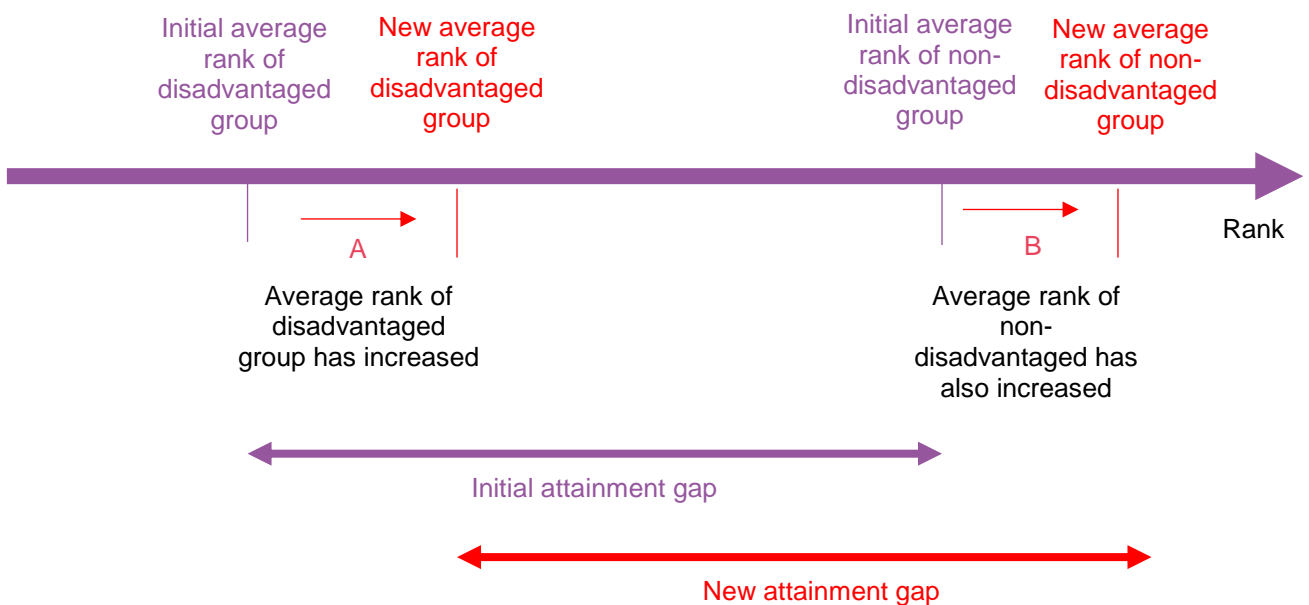
Note: KS2 attainment is based on average KS2 point score across English, writing and maths. KS4 attainment is based on average attainment scores in English and maths.

4.3 What is the expected impact of an increase in the number of pupils defined as disadvantaged on the attainment gap?

Given that the attainment of newly FSM6 pupils is somewhere in between those who are not FSM6 and those who were already FSM6, an increase in the number of FSM6 pupils has two simultaneous effects on the measurement of the KS2 or KS4 attainment gap. These are presented in Figure 14 below:

- **Effect A:** The average attainment rank of the disadvantaged group increases due to relatively higher attaining newly disadvantaged pupils joining this group.
- **Effect B:** The average attainment rank within the non-disadvantaged group increases due to relatively lower attaining newly disadvantaged pupils leaving this group.

Figure 14: Impact of an increase in disadvantage on the attainment gap



The size of both of these effects depends on how many pupils become newly disadvantaged and the difference between the attainment in the newly disadvantaged group, the disadvantaged group and the non-disadvantaged group.

In other words, in general, the impact of an increase in disadvantage on the measurement of the attainment gap is ambiguous, and will depend both on the attainment of the pupils becoming disadvantaged and how large the group becoming disadvantaged is.

We explore our findings further in Appendices II and III by investigating how changes in FSM6 rates are likely to impact the size of the attainment gap in practice. This is done using two different methods:

- **Within-cohort variation:** Our first analysis explores how the measurement of the 2019 attainment gap changes if we vary which pupils are defined as ‘disadvantaged’ in the calculation of the gap, whilst holding each pupil’s exam attainment fixed.
- **Simulating changes in the FSM6 rate:** Our second analysis explores how increasing in the FSM6 rate by different magnitudes may impact the size of the attainment gap.

As outlined in Appendices II and III, our first analysis shows that the size of the attainment gap is very sensitive to the point at which a pupil’s FSM6 status is observed. It also confirms that the impact of an increase in the size of the group of FSM6 pupils is ambiguous. Similarly, the second analysis demonstrates the direction and size of a change in the attainment gap is heavily dependent on both the average attainment of those becoming newly FSM6, and the size of the group becoming newly FSM6.

Together, these analyses confirm that the impact of an increase in the size of the group of FSM6 pupils on the attainment gap is ambiguous and that it is very difficult to predict how a change in the FSM6 rate will affect the interpretation of the attainment gap.

4.4 Discussion

By construction, the disadvantaged attainment gap (or for that matter, any other ‘attainment gap’ measure) is a relative measure, and depends on how disadvantage is defined. Even before this year, there was year-on-year variability in FSM6 rates which made it tricky to assess whether changes in the KS2 and KS4 disadvantaged gaps were due to cohort or attainment changes.

The composition of the FSM6 group is set to change significantly over the next 15 years due to recent and anticipated increases in FSM6 rates. In terms of immediate effects, the Covid-19 pandemic has increased the numbers of pupils becoming newly FSM, which has impacted the composition of the FSM6 group (particularly in primary). As shown by our analysis, the greater the increase in FSM6, the greater the likelihood that compositional changes are affecting the measurement of the attainment gap.

The change in the composition of the FSM6 group is likely to be affecting how the attainment gap has evolved during the pandemic. However, given that the impact of changes to the composition of the disadvantage group is ambiguous, it is extremely difficult to predict to what extent changes in composition might be affecting the measurement of the attainment gap.

In the medium-term, changes in the attainment gap will become even more difficult to interpret. This is because, from 2023/24 onwards, the UC transition arrangements will mean that the ‘definition’ used to attach FSM6 status to a pupil will be changing from one year to the next. This will create even greater differences in the composition of the disadvantaged group over time.

Recent and anticipated changes in FSM6 eligibility have important implications for policy, as it is very difficult to target interventions towards closing attainment gaps if they cannot be reliably measured. This is a particular concern at the present time as it will make it difficult to evaluate the extent to which learning recovery programs are supporting young people.

It is important to note that this issue is not only related to the measurement of the attainment gap. Schools will face the same issues in benchmarking pupil performance over time. Increasing FSM6 rates may mean that the performance of PP pupils appears to improve, compared to what it would have otherwise been. This will create difficulties for school leaders, governing bodies and Ofsted (who already contend with a large amount of statistical noise when interpreting attainment measures) as it will make it even more difficult to understand how disadvantaged pupils are performing and where targeted support is most needed. This will be a particular challenge in secondary schools as pupils are more likely to have been last eligible for FSM over six years before.

One possible solution is to use a basket of measures, which includes the current measure of the attainment gap, to understand how the attainment and composition of disadvantaged pupils is evolving over time. This could draw on existing measures, alongside measures which establish how the attainment of pupils who are more ‘similar’ in terms of their disadvantage is evolving over time. This might be done by comparing pupils who are more similar in terms of the persistence of their disadvantage over time. However, one of the consequences of the UC transitional arrangements is that, because all FSM-eligible pupils are retaining their eligibility status, it will no longer be possible to identify the length of time a pupil has been disadvantaged for (where disadvantage is defined by them meeting the underlying criteria for FSM eligibility).

We recommend that data which identifies the length of time a pupil has been disadvantaged should be collected or provided by the Government (linked to attainment at the pupil level) to ensure that policymakers and researchers are able to better interpret and evaluate changes in the attainment of disadvantaged pupils over the next decade.

5 Funding for disadvantage

Key findings

- While the PP is often thought of as the main way in which funding for deprivation is targeted across schools, over half of funding for deprivation is targeted towards schools through the National Funding Formula (NFF).
- Each newly FSM6 primary and secondary pupil attracts almost £2,000 extra for their school through the PP and NFF combined. This is substantial: in 2020/21, primary and secondary schools received an average of £5,300 and £6,200 per pupil in government funding (including the PP) respectively.
- The Government is also providing schools with an additional £145 per PP pupil in 2021/22 via the recovery premium in order to support learning recovery. For 2022/23 and 2023/24, primary PP pupils will continue to attract an additional £145 per pupil, while secondary pupils are expected to attract an additional £290 per pupil.
- However, the value of the PP, in real terms, has been eroded since 2014/15. If the PP grant had kept in-line with inflation since 2014/15, then primary and secondary schools would be receiving £160 and £127 more per PP pupil today, compared to what they actually receive²⁶.
- Anticipated increases in FSM6 rates will, all things being equal, increase the share of pupils who will be attracting PP funding. However, this is largely a group of pupils with lower attainment compared to their non-disadvantaged peers (as outlined in Section 4).
- It is important that PP and recovery premium funding are considered within the wider funding context. For example, while deprived primary and secondary schools may be seeing more funding through the PP grant and recovery premium, they are set to receive smaller than average increases in funding per pupil through the NFF in 2021/22.

This section discusses how funding for disadvantage is being targeted to help schools support their disadvantaged pupils. It also explores the implications of recent and anticipated changes in FSM eligibility and FSM6 for the level of school funding.

5.1 How is funding for disadvantage allocated?

This sub-section explains how schools are funded to support their disadvantaged pupils, and investigates how funding for disadvantage fits into the wider school funding context.

The PP grant is one of the key ways in which the number of disadvantaged pupils which a school has impacts the amount of funding which a school receives. The PP grant was first introduced by the coalition Government in 2011 to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils (DfE, 2015a).

²⁶ It is worth noting that the Government is planning to increase the value of the PP in 2022/23 by 2.7 per cent (DfE, 2021f). However, this increase will only maintain the PP at its current levels, rather than restore any previous declines.

Currently, schools get £1,345 for every primary-age pupil and £955 for every secondary-age pupil who has been eligible for FSM at any point in the last six years, as well as additional funding for currently or previously looked-after children and children from service families.

As all schools are required to publish a report on their website outlining how they have spent their PP funding, the PP ensures that schools are considering strategies to support their disadvantaged pupils as well as providing funds to deliver them. From this year onwards, schools will also need to demonstrate how their PP spending decisions are informed by research evidence (DfE, 2021e).

While evaluating the effectiveness of the PP grant and understanding best practice in using the grant are outside the scope of this research, previous NFER research has shown that schools tend to use a large number of strategies in order to raise the attainment of PP pupils (Macleod *et al.*, 2015). The most popular strategies, and those that schools considered to be the most effective, included: paired or small group additional teaching; improving feedback; and one-to-one tuition.

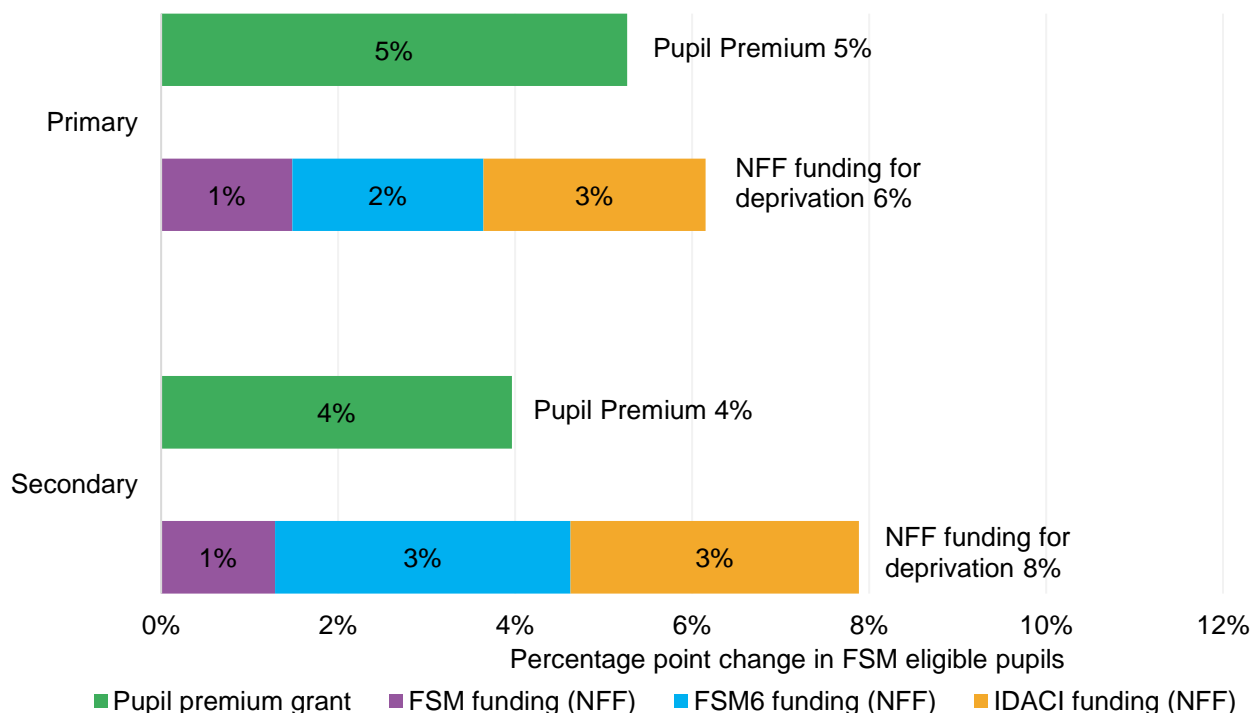
It is important to recognise that the PP grant is part of the overall government budget for schools. How a change in PP affects the funding levels for different types of schools will depend on government decisions about the overall amount of funding available for schools and whether the Government needs to vary spending elsewhere in the budget to accommodate changes in PP spending.

Schools also receive funding towards supporting their disadvantaged pupils from the NFF for schools. The vast majority (around 90 per cent) of school funding for five to 16 year-old pupils in mainstream schools is allocated through the NFF (DfE, 2021b). The NFF is calculated for each school in England, primarily based on the needs of the pupils who attend the school, accounting for both pupil-level and school-level characteristics. At the moment, the NFF is used to allocate funding to local authorities, who then have some flexibilities in allocating funding to the schools (both LA maintained and academies) in their local authority.

5.2 To what extent is school funding targeted towards disadvantage?

Figure 15 shows that, on average, over ten per cent of the Government funding which primary and secondary schools receive is targeted towards their disadvantaged pupils.

Figure 15: Breakdown of different shares of government funding for an average primary and secondary school, 2020/21



Source: NFER analysis of DfE School Revenue Funding statistics
Note: In some cases percentages may not sum to totals due to rounding

However, there is significant variability between schools. On average, funding for disadvantage accounts for around 20 per cent of government funding in the fifth of primary schools with the highest FSM rates. This compares to four per cent in the fifth of primary schools with the lowest FSM rates.

While the PP is often thought of as the main mechanism of targeting funding towards disadvantaged schools, over half of funding for disadvantage is allocated through the NFF. This shows that it is important to consider the NFF alongside the PP in considering the extent to which school funding is targeted towards the most disadvantaged schools. For an average primary school, just under half of this (around five per cent) is from the PP, while the remaining six per cent of funding is allocated through the *deprivation* elements of the NFF. The comparable estimates for an average secondary school are four per cent from the PP, and eight per cent through the *deprivation* elements of the NFF.

The amount of NFF funding which schools receive for *deprivation* is based on:

- The costs of actually providing free school meals to pupils, which is based on the number of FSM-eligible pupils. This represents one per cent of funding in both primary and secondary schools.
- The deprivation associated with the areas within which pupils are living, based on the IDACI index. This represents three per cent of funding in both primary and secondary schools.

- The number of FSM6 pupils. On average, a further two and three per cent of funding is allocated to FSM6 pupils in primary and secondary schools respectively. Local authorities outside London who follow notional NFF allocations²⁷ allocated schools an additional £575 for a primary school pupil and an additional £840 for a secondary pupil in 2021/22.

Together with the PP, this shows that schools face a significant increase in funding when a pupil becomes newly FSM6, representing an £1,800 and £1,900 increase in funding for a primary and secondary school respectively. This is substantial: primary and secondary schools in 2020/21 received on average £5,300 and £6,200 in government funding per pupil respectively (including both NFF and PP funding).

5.3 Catch-up funding

During the current academic year, schools are receiving an additional £145 per PP pupil through the Government’s recovery premium (DfE, 2021h). The Government has also committed an extra £202.50 per PP pupil this year for School-Led Tutoring, albeit only the schools that take up the tutoring will be able to access this funding, and schools still need to provide a 25 per cent subsidy towards it (DfE, 2021h). Schools are also able to access additional support for their disadvantaged pupils through both the academic mentors and tuition partners’ strands of the National Tutoring Programme (NTP). However, as with school-led tutoring, schools need to contribute towards the costs of both of these schemes from their existing funding (including PP).

For 2022/23 and 2023/24, the Government has committed to extending the recovery premium such that each PP primary pupil will continue to receive an additional £145 per pupil and for secondary pupils this will double to £290. However, the Government is also planning to increase the subsidies which schools need to provide in order to access support through School-Led Tutoring, Tuition Partners and Academic Mentors. For example, the subsidy which schools will need to provide to access Tuition Partners tutoring will increase from 30 per cent this year (costing roughly £80 per pupil per 15 hour tutoring block), to 50 per cent in 2022/23 (costing roughly £135) and 75 per cent in 2023/24 (costing roughly £203). So, by 2023/24, the recovery premium will not be sufficient to cover the costs of a single block of NTP tuition for a primary PP pupil. The ‘buying power’ of the recovery premium will reduce over the coming years.

5.4 How did funding for disadvantage change in 2020/21?

In 2020/21, more deprived primary and secondary schools were attracting additional funding to support their disadvantaged pupils via the PP. The increase in the share of secondary pupils attracting PP funding was larger than the increase in FSM6 rates would suggest (at 0.5 percentage points, from 26.1 to 26.5 per cent; this compares to a 0.2 percentage point increase in FSM6 in secondary schools)²⁸. In contrast, the increase in the share of primary pupils attracting PP funding

²⁷ As outlined above, local authorities have some flexibilities in allocating funding across schools and do need to follow the NFF.

²⁸ Please note that the difference in PP rates does not appear to be equal to 0.5 due to rounding. It is important to note that the FSM6 and PP rates are not directly comparable, as the PP rate is constructed using the number of pupils on roll and the FSM6 rate is constructed using the number of pupils in PP eligible year groups (e.g. only includes pupils between Reception and Year 11).

was less rapid than the increase in FSM6 rates would suggest (at 0.9 percentage points, from 22.1 to 23.0 per cent; this compares to a 2.2 percentage point increase in FSM6 in primary schools). These seemingly odd trends are due to a policy change by the DfE. The DfE collects data from schools on the number of pupils and FSM-eligible pupils that they have three times a year. These collections take place in October (known as the Autumn Census), January (Spring Census) and May (Summer census). All of the analysis in this report is based on the January census as this is the latest available census at the time of writing, and the census which had, until this year, been used to allocate funding for deprivation through both the PP and the NFF.

In December 2020, the Government retrospectively announced that PP grant allocations for 2021/22 would be based on the October 2020 census, rather than the January one (Carr, 2021). With this change, pupils who became eligible for FSM between October 2020 and January 2021 would not have qualified for free school meals in time to increase their school's PP funding.

Due to the pandemic, the period between October 2020 and January 2021 saw a substantial increase in the number of eligible pupils. For those pupils who did become eligible before the October count, schools had less time than they would have reasonably expected to work with parents to record 'new' free school meal eligibility (as the change was enacted retrospectively), leading to a shortfall in identification of the true number of eligible pupils (DfE, 2021e).

While the PP grant increased by £60 million between 2020/21 and 2021/22, the DfE estimates that it would have increased by nearly £90 million extra (on top of the £60 million) had the census date not been changed (DfE, 2021e). In other words, many of those newly eligible pupils (as outlined in Section 3.1) will not attract additional PP and FSM6-related funding for their schools until 2022/23²⁹. This change has disproportionately impacted primary schools in deprived areas.

While more deprived schools may be seeing more funding through the PP grant, they are set to receive smaller than average increases per pupil in funding through the NFF in 2021/22. For example, in 2021/22, the most deprived fifth of primary schools were set to receive an increase of 2.7 percent in pupil-led funding per pupil, compared to a 5.0 percent increase in the least disadvantaged schools. More deprived primary and secondary schools are set to be losing over £100 and £80 more per pupil respectively through the smaller increase in funding through the NFF than they will be gaining via the PP. This is partly due to the Government's 'levelling-up' policy (DfE, 2020a) – which is focused on raising the minimum level of funding received per pupil. As more deprived schools typically already receive higher levels of funding per pupil than other schools (to reflect the increased challenges they face) they have seen the smallest increases in funding as a result of levelling-up. This is despite the fact that our previous Covid-19 research identified that these schools face the biggest challenge in supporting their pupils to catch-up (Sharp *et al.*, 2020).

There is a concern that if more deprived schools are seeing smaller increases in funding elsewhere in their budgets, then they will be less able to use their PP funding to support their pupils' attainment and wider recovery from the pandemic. This has been a concern since the PP was first

²⁹ Some of the newly FSM6 pupils will have already been attracting PP funding (where they are currently or previously in care of the local authority).

introduced (Ofsted 2012; HoC Education Committee, 2019). More recently, an NFER survey of senior leaders in March 2021 found that around a third of school leaders were using the PP to cover gaps elsewhere in their budget (NFER, 2021). The situation is exacerbated for primary schools, who are facing increasing budget pressures as a result of falling pupil numbers (DfE, 2021d) – which underpin the funding calculations – despite the fact that many face limited scope for cost savings.

There is a need for greater transparency in the amount of money being targeted towards disadvantage across the school funding system. This could help to ensure that funding for disadvantage is being maintained over time, which is not what has happened over the last decade. The IFS has shown that the most disadvantaged schools were the most significantly hit by real terms declines in per pupil spending between 2009/10 and 2019/20 (Sibieta, 2021).

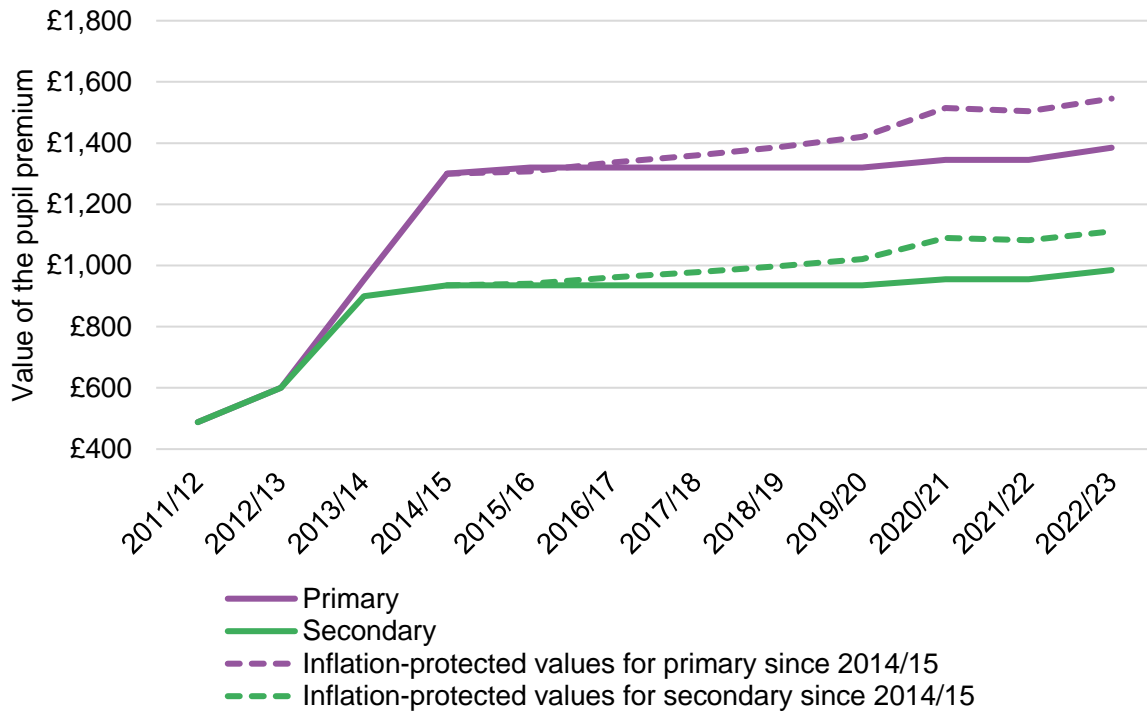
5.5 How will anticipated changes in FSM6 rates affect school funding?

Deprived primary and secondary schools are expected to see increases in FSM6 rates over the next decade (due to both UC transitional arrangements and increased FSM6 rates driven by the pandemic). This increase will be greater in secondary, compared to primary, because there are fewer pupils in primary schools who have been in school for over six years. This means that there will be fewer pupils in primary who would normally have stopped being FSM6 eligible but whose eligibility status will be maintained due to the UC transitional arrangements.

Based on current funding arrangements, this suggests that they will attract a larger amount of funding through both the PP grant and the NFF in future. How this affects the funding levels for different types of schools will depend on government decisions about the overall amount of funding available for schools and the rate of increase in the NFF each year.

The extent to which this represents a real terms increase in school funding for more disadvantaged schools will depend on the value of the PP. While the PP remains an important component of schools' funding, the value of the PP, in real terms, has been eroded since 2014/15. If the PP grant had kept in line with inflation (as measured by the GDP deflator) since 2014/15, then primary and secondary schools would be receiving £160 and £127 more per PP pupil today compared to what they actually receive. While the Government is planning to increase PP by 2.7 per cent in 2022/23 (DfE, 2021f), this increase will only maintain the PP at its current levels, rather than restore any previous declines. In context, this is equivalent to the funding which schools are receiving via the recovery premium this year.

Figure 16: Value of the pupil premium between 2011/12 and 2021/22



Source: NFER analysis of pupil premium and GDP deflator (HM Treasury, 2021a)

5.6 Discussion

This section raises several important questions about how funding designed to address disadvantaged attainment gaps is targeted and protected over time. Schools receive a significant increase in funding associated with a pupil becoming newly eligible for free school meals, which suggests that there may be a way to improve how funding is targeting towards disadvantaged pupils.

We investigate this by estimating the correlation between the share of FSM6 pupils, the share of pupils who have spent over 80 per cent of their schooling as FSM eligible and the share of pupils who have ever been recorded as FSM. As shown by Table 4, we find that at any given point in time there is a strong relationship between these measures. This tells us that, when it comes to allocating funding at the school level, it does not make much difference as to which of these three measures is used to allocate funding to schools.

Table 4 Correlation between measures of disadvantage at the school level by phase, January 2021

| | Average FSM eligibility rate | Average FSM6 rate | Average rate of pupil who have FSM eligible in any year |
|---|------------------------------|-------------------|---|
| <i>Primary</i> | | | |
| Average FSM6 rate by school | 0.99 | - | - |
| Average rate of pupil who have FSM eligible in any year | 0.99 | 1.00 | - |
| Average share of pupils who have spent over 80 per cent of their schooling as FSM eligible | 0.96 | 0.95 | 0.95 |
| <i>Secondary</i> | | | |
| Average FSM6 rate by school | 0.98 | - | - |
| Average rate of pupil who have FSM eligible in any year | 0.97 | 0.99 | - |
| Average share of pupils who have spent over 80 per cent of their schooling as FSM eligible | 0.97 | 0.95 | 0.93 |

Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database

Nevertheless, there may be room to improve how funding for disadvantage is targeted. There is a strong case for extending PP status from FSM6 to all pupils who have been FSM eligible at any point in the past (Treadaway, 2014). The rationale is three-fold. First, as shown in Section 4.2, pupils who have been FSM eligible at any point in the past have significantly lower attainment than non-disadvantaged pupils. Given that PP status encourages schools to target more support towards pupils, extending PP status ensures that these pupils are not overlooked in pupil-level interventions. Second, extending PP status from FSM6 to all pupils who have been FSM eligible at any point in the past will make level of funding for disadvantage less dependent on what was happening to FSM rates six years ago (which is a somewhat arbitrary cut-off). Finally, given the UC transitional arrangements will mean that a large number of pupils who have been FSM eligible at any point in the past are going to become FSM6 anyway, this will create minimal disruption to existing arrangements.

There is also a case for targeting more PP funding towards pupils who are more persistently disadvantaged (as suggested by ASCL, 2021 and Gorard *et al.*, 2021). In Section 4.2, we also showed that, even within the disadvantaged group, there is a large amount of variation in attainment according to the length of time a pupil has been disadvantaged. In general, the longer a pupil has been disadvantaged, the lower their average attainment. This demonstrates that there may be a case to make the existing PP funding system more targeted towards those pupils who have been disadvantaged for the longest to encourage schools to target interventions towards those most in need. However, given that this will not make a large difference to funding allocations at the school-level (as outlined by Table 4), the benefits of making the PP more targeted may be outweighed by the complexity introduced by reforming the current system.

6 Conclusions

The UC transitional arrangements were always set to significantly increase the number of FSM-eligible pupils over the coming years, and FSM6 pupils over the next decade. However, the impact of these arrangements has been amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of this on FSM6 rates will be significant: if the FSM6 status of all current pupils had been protected until Year 11, the current FSM6 rate in secondary would be a fifth larger than it currently is.

The changing profile of pupils who are disadvantaged will mean that the average attainment of this group is likely to increase even if the attainment of individual pupils is unchanged. The overall impact on the attainment gap measure is ambiguous.

This will make it more difficult for schools, governing bodies and policymakers to understand what is actually happening to differences in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. However, the attainment gap is a key policy measure which is likely to inform the extent to which the Government targets additional support towards young people.

One possible solution is to use a basket of measures to understand how the attainment and profile of disadvantaged pupils is evolving over time. This would draw on existing measures (e.g. the current measure of the attainment gap), alongside other measures which establish how the attainment of pupils who are more 'similar' in terms of their disadvantage is evolving over time. It has been suggested that those in persistent poverty could be one such measure. However, one of the consequences of the UC transitional arrangements is that, because all FSM-eligible pupils will retain their eligibility status, it will no longer be possible to identify the length of time a pupil has been disadvantaged for (in terms of their underlying family circumstances). Additional data needs to be collected or collated now to ensure that the attainment of disadvantaged pupils can be interpreted going forward.

While the PP grant has been successful at ensuring schools are considering how they can best support their disadvantaged pupils, the level of funding has not been protected over time. In order to address persistent attainment gaps between pupils from different backgrounds, and support recovery as we emerge from the pandemic, there is a need for greater scrutiny on how school funding is being used to support disadvantaged pupils and greater protection around the necessary levels of funding.

It is important that PP funding is considered within the wider funding context. How a change in PP affects the funding levels for different types of schools will depend on government decisions about the overall amount of funding available for schools and whether the Government needs to vary spending elsewhere in the budget to accommodate changes in PP spending.

Ten years from its inception, now is also an opportune time to re-consider the design of the PP grant. Pupils who have been eligible for FSM remain academically disadvantaged throughout their schooling, not just for six years. There is a strong case for ensuring that additional support is targeted towards all pupils who have been eligible for FSM at any point in time. There is also a case for targeting more funding towards those who have been disadvantaged for longer based on their underlying family circumstances, albeit this would introduce greater complexity for schools.

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Appendix I: Data sources and methodology

All of our analysis focuses on state-funded mainstream primary and secondary schools in England. Where schools are grouped by phase, pupils are grouped by a school’s main phase (rather than year group). All-through schools have been included with secondaries. All datasets have been cleaned to remove outliers and inconsistencies.

Headline measures for FSM eligibility include pupils from all year groups to ensure consistency with published DfE measures. However, school-level analysis and forecast FSM rates are based on pupils between Reception and Year 11. This is to ensure comparability across schools and cohorts. All FSM6 measures are based on pupils between Reception and Year 11 only.

Data sources

Information from DfE’s ‘Schools, pupils and their characteristics’ (DfE, 2021i) has been presented where available. This is complemented by NPD Spring Census data from 2006/07 to 2020/21 which has been used to track FSM and FSM6 eligibility, and identify the background characteristics of young people who have become eligible for free school meals during the last year (with a focus on pupils who became eligible for FSM between January 2020 and 2021).

The KS2 and KS4 attainment gap simulations were constructed using the 2018/19 KS2 and KS4 NPD student attainment data. KS2 attainment is based on average attainment across KS2 reading, writing and maths scores. KS4 attainment is based on average KS4 English and Maths scores. Both KS2 and KS4 attainment scores were standardised. Sensitivity analysis for KS2 was conducted using the 2016/17 and 2017/18 data, and the 2018/19 KS4 NPD student attainment data³⁰.

Our analysis of notional schools block NFF Allocations (DfE, 2019 and DfE, 2020) is based on increases in per pupil funding between 2020/21 and 2021/22. Our analysis also draws on the DfE’s School Funding Statistics 2020/21 (DfE, 2021g) and pupil premium grant allocations (DfE, 2015b-e, DfE, 2016; DfE, 2017; DfE, 2020 and DfE, 2021e).

Estimating the January 2021 and 2023 FSM eligibility rates

In order to estimate the counterfactual January 2021 FSM eligibility rate, we take the FSM eligibility rate in January 2020 and assume that for all pupils in Reception to Year 11 (a) all pupils who were eligible in January 2020 retain their eligibility as per the UC transitional arrangements, (b) the rate that pupils became newly eligible for FSM in Reception is that same as in 2020, (c) the probability that a pupil becomes newly eligible for FSM given that they have not been eligible for FSM in the last two years (to reflect the UC transitional arrangements) is the same as in January 2018³¹. We

³⁰ This was based on attainment 8 scores.

³¹ This year is used as it is the last data point before the UC transitional arrangements were introduced.

hold the FSM rate in all other year groups fixed. The same methodology was applied iteratively to estimate how the 2021 January FSM eligibility rate would evolve up to 2023³².

It is important to note that our predictions will tend to over-estimate the impact of the UC transitional arrangements as, while we assume that all existing FSM pupils retain their eligibility as per the UC transitional arrangements, there is a small proportion of pupils who stop being FSM eligible every year, despite the fact that their FSM status is protected by the transitional arrangements (Thomson, 2021).

Attainment gap simulations

Our analysis presented in Appendices II and III explores how changes in FSM6 eligibility are likely to impact the size of the KS2 and KS4 disadvantaged attainment gaps in practice.

Our first analysis explores how the 2019 KS2 and KS4 disadvantaged attainment gap would have changed if it was measured based on the FSM6 status of the same individuals in different years. For KS2, our estimates were constructed by restricting the sample to pupils who were consistently recorded in the NPD between 2017 and 2021, and who took their KS2 assessment in 2018/19.

A slightly different methodology is used for KS4 as the FSM status of KS4 pupils is not observed after they complete their KS4 assessments. As a result, our estimates for KS4 were constructed by restricting the sample to pupils who were consistently recorded in the NPD between 2015 and 2019, and who took their KS4 assessment in 2018/19.

Our second analysis simulates how hypothetical increases in the FSM6 rate may impact the size of the 2019 KS2 and KS4 attainment gaps. We investigate this in two ways, using both a theoretical and numerical model. The theoretical model uses the average attainment rank of FSM6 and non-FSM6 pupils in 2019, and the relative size of FSM6 group in 2019 to consider what impact pupils becoming newly FSM6 might have on the attainment gap.

For KS2, the numerical model uses the characteristics of the pupils who became newly eligible for FSM6 during the pandemic to simulate to explore the impact of anticipated increases in the pupils becoming newly FSM6, based on the assumption that current trends continue. The numerical model was constructed using the following steps. First, the sample of pupils who became newly eligible for FSM6 between 2019 and 2021 was stratified by groups based on key characteristics. Second, this stratification was then used to randomly assign FSM6 status to individuals becoming newly FSM6 such that the distribution of newly FSM6 pupils across groups was comparable to the distribution in pupils became newly FSM6 during the pandemic. For each set of characteristics, this process was repeated iteratively in order to construct an average estimate for the impact on the attainment gap associated with a given percentage point increase in FSM6 eligibility.

For KS4, the numerical model used a similar methodology. The main difference is that the characteristics of the pupils who became newly eligible for FSM6 between 2017 and 2019 (rather

³² In each iteration, the probability that a pupil becomes newly eligible for FSM was updated to reflect how many years it has been since the UC transitional arrangements were introduced.

than those who became eligible during the pandemic) was used to simulate to explore the impact of anticipated increases in the pupils becoming newly FSM6.

Appendix II: KS2 attainment gap

This section investigates how changes in FSM6 rates are likely to impact the size of the KS2 attainment gap in practice. This is done using two different methods:

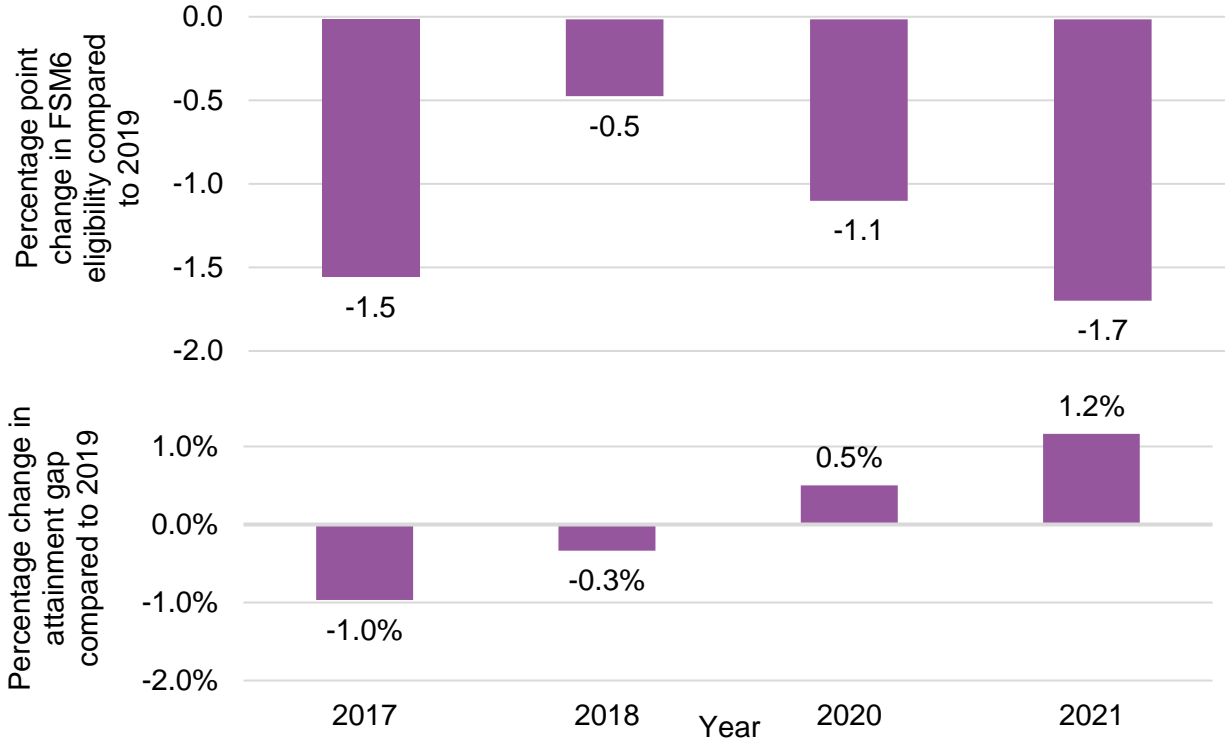
- **Within-cohort variation:** Our first analysis explores how the measurement of the 2019 attainment gap changes if we vary which pupils are defined as ‘disadvantaged’ in the calculation of the gap, whilst holding each pupil’s exam attainment fixed.
- **Simulating changes in the FSM6 rate:** Our second analysis explores how increasing in the FSM6 rate by different magnitudes may impact the size of the attainment gap.

Within-cohort variation

Our first analysis considers how the 2019 attainment gap would have changed if we vary which pupils are defined as ‘disadvantaged’ in the calculation of the gap, whilst holding each pupil’s exam attainment fixed. In others words, our analysis considers how the attainment gap would change, if instead of defining the disadvantaged group using the FSM6 eligibility of pupils in 2019, we identify the disadvantaged group using the FSM6 eligibility status of the same individuals in other years. As we are keeping pupil exam attainment fixed, this enables us to isolate how changes in the FSM6 status of pupils impact on the attainment gap measure.

The first panel of Figure 17 presents how the FSM6 rate of the 2019 Year 6 cohort changes depending on the year in which the FSM6 status of pupils is measured. It shows that the FSM6 eligibility rate of the 2019 Year 6 cohort was highest in 2019. The second panel of Figure 17 shows how the attainment gap varies depending on the year in which the FSM6 status of pupils is measured. Together, the panels show that, while the FSM6 rate of this cohort was lower in both 2017 and 2021 compared to 2019, the attainment gap is smaller using the 2017 FSM6 rate but larger using the 2021 rate. This shows that the size of the KS2 attainment gap is very sensitive to the point at which a pupil’s FSM6 status is observed. It also confirms that the impact of an increase in the size of the group of FSM6 pupils is ambiguous.

Figure 17: Change in FSM6 for 2019 Year 6 cohort, by FSM6 status between 2017 and 2021



Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database

Simulating changes in the FSM6 rate

Our second analysis explores how increasing the FSM6 rate by different magnitudes may impact the size of the attainment gap. This is to develop our understanding of how the recent and anticipated increases in the FSM6 rate (as outlined in Section 3) will impact the measurement of the KS2 attainment gap going forward.

First, we consider how the 2018/19 KS2 attainment gap varies with:

- increasing the FSM6 rate by different magnitudes and;
- the average attainment of the pupils becoming newly FSM6.

The results, which are presented in Table 5, show that the direction and size of a change in the KS2 attainment gap is heavily dependent on both the average attainment of those becoming newly FSM6, and the size of the group becoming newly FSM6.

Table 5 Percentage change in the KS2 attainment gap, corresponding to a given increase in the FSM6 rate and the attainment of newly FSM pupils

Percentage point change in size of newly FSM6 group

0.5 p.p. 1 p.p. 1.5 p.p. 2 p.p. 2.5 p.p. 3 p.p. 3.5 p.p. 4 p.p. 4.5 p.p. 5 p.p. 5.5 p.p. 6 p.p. 6.5 p.p. 7 p.p. 7.5 p.p. 8 p.p. 8.5 p.p. 9 p.p. 9.5 p.p. 10 p.p.

Mean attainment rank percentile of newly FSM6 group

Increase in size of newly FSM6 group

Increase in average attainment percentile rank of newly FSM6 group

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 41% | 0.5% | 1.0% | 1.6% | 2.1% | 2.7% | 3.2% | 3.8% | 4.4% | 5.0% | 5.7% | 6.3% | 7.0% | 7.6% | 8.3% | 9.0% | 9.7% | 10.4% | 11.2% | 11.9% | 12.7% |
| 42% | 0.3% | 0.7% | 1.0% | 1.4% | 1.8% | 2.2% | 2.6% | 3.1% | 3.5% | 4.0% | 4.5% | 5.0% | 5.5% | 6.1% | 6.6% | 7.2% | 7.8% | 8.4% | 9.0% | 9.6% |
| 43% | 0.1% | 0.3% | 0.5% | 0.7% | 0.9% | 1.2% | 1.4% | 1.7% | 2.0% | 2.4% | 2.7% | 3.1% | 3.4% | 3.8% | 4.2% | 4.7% | 5.1% | 5.6% | 6.0% | 6.5% |
| 44% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.1% | 0.1% | 0.3% | 0.4% | 0.5% | 0.7% | 0.9% | 1.1% | 1.3% | 1.6% | 1.8% | 2.1% | 2.4% | 2.8% | 3.1% | 3.5% |
| 45% | -0.2% | -0.4% | -0.6% | -0.7% | -0.8% | -0.9% | -0.9% | -1.0% | -1.0% | -1.0% | -0.9% | -0.9% | -0.8% | -0.7% | -0.5% | -0.4% | -0.2% | 0.0% | 0.2% | 0.4% |
| 46% | -0.4% | -0.8% | -1.1% | -1.4% | -1.7% | -1.9% | -2.1% | -2.3% | -2.5% | -2.6% | -2.7% | -2.8% | -2.9% | -2.9% | -2.9% | -2.9% | -2.9% | -2.8% | -2.8% | -2.7% |
| 47% | -0.6% | -1.1% | -1.6% | -2.1% | -2.5% | -2.9% | -3.3% | -3.7% | -4.0% | -4.3% | -4.5% | -4.8% | -5.0% | -5.1% | -5.3% | -5.4% | -5.6% | -5.7% | -5.7% | -5.8% |
| 48% | -0.8% | -1.5% | -2.2% | -2.8% | -3.4% | -4.0% | -4.5% | -5.0% | -5.5% | -5.9% | -6.3% | -6.7% | -7.1% | -7.4% | -7.7% | -8.0% | -8.2% | -8.5% | -8.7% | -8.9% |
| 49% | -0.9% | -1.8% | -2.7% | -3.5% | -4.3% | -5.0% | -5.7% | -6.3% | -7.0% | -7.6% | -8.1% | -8.7% | -9.2% | -9.6% | -10.1% | -10.5% | -10.9% | -11.3% | -11.6% | -11.9% |
| 50% | -1.1% | -2.2% | -3.2% | -4.2% | -5.1% | -6.0% | -6.9% | -7.7% | -8.5% | -9.2% | -9.9% | -10.6% | -11.3% | -11.9% | -12.5% | -13.0% | -13.6% | -14.1% | -14.5% | -15.0% |
| 51% | -1.3% | -2.6% | -3.7% | -4.9% | -6.0% | -7.1% | -8.1% | -9.0% | -10.0% | -10.9% | -11.7% | -12.6% | -13.3% | -14.1% | -14.8% | -15.5% | -16.2% | -16.9% | -17.5% | -18.1% |
| 52% | -1.5% | -2.9% | -4.3% | -5.6% | -6.9% | -8.1% | -9.3% | -10.4% | -11.5% | -12.5% | -13.5% | -14.5% | -15.4% | -16.4% | -17.2% | -18.1% | -18.9% | -19.7% | -20.4% | -21.2% |
| 53% | -1.7% | -3.3% | -4.8% | -6.3% | -7.7% | -9.1% | -10.4% | -11.7% | -13.0% | -14.2% | -15.3% | -16.5% | -17.5% | -18.6% | -19.6% | -20.6% | -21.6% | -22.5% | -23.4% | -24.2% |

Source: NFER analysis based on National Pupil Database

More specifically, it illustrates that the higher the attainment of those becoming newly FSM6, the greater the likelihood that the attainment gap will appear to narrow. For example, the table shows that if the newly FSM6 group has a relatively high attainment rank (e.g. 53rd percentile), then any increase in the FSM6 group will make the attainment gap seem smaller. Conversely, if the newly FSM6 group has a relatively low attainment rank (e.g. 41st percentile), then any increase in the FSM6 group will make the attainment gap seem larger.

In general, the larger the change in the FSM6 rate, the greater the impact on the attainment gap. Indeed, regardless of whether the newly FSM6 group has a high or low attainment rank, a ten percentage point increase in the size of the FSM6 rate almost always has a larger impact on the attainment gap than a one percentage point increase. This is important as it shows that recent and anticipated changes in FSM6 rates (as outlined in Section 3) will make the disadvantaged attainment gap even more difficult to interpret.

It is important to note that, because the relative attainment of different groups is likely to have been impacted differentially by the pandemic, it is not possible to use this table to predict what impact the pandemic might have had on the attainment gap. As a result, an increase in the FSM6 pupils could have both a positive or negative impact of the size of the attainment gap.

Second, we draw on the 2018/19 KS2 attainment data to consider how the attainment gap is likely to change for different increases in the FSM6 rate (while holding pupil attainment fixed). We simulate this by using the characteristics of the pupils who became newly eligible for FSM6 during the pandemic to explore the impact of anticipated increases in the pupils becoming newly FSM6, based on the assumption that current trends continue.

Figure 18 presents the percentage change in the KS2 attainment gap using three different scenarios. These scenarios assume that the pupils who become FSM6 in future are ‘similar’ to those who became FSM6 during the pandemic. Across each scenario, a different set of characteristics is used to simulate which pupils might become FSM6 in future.

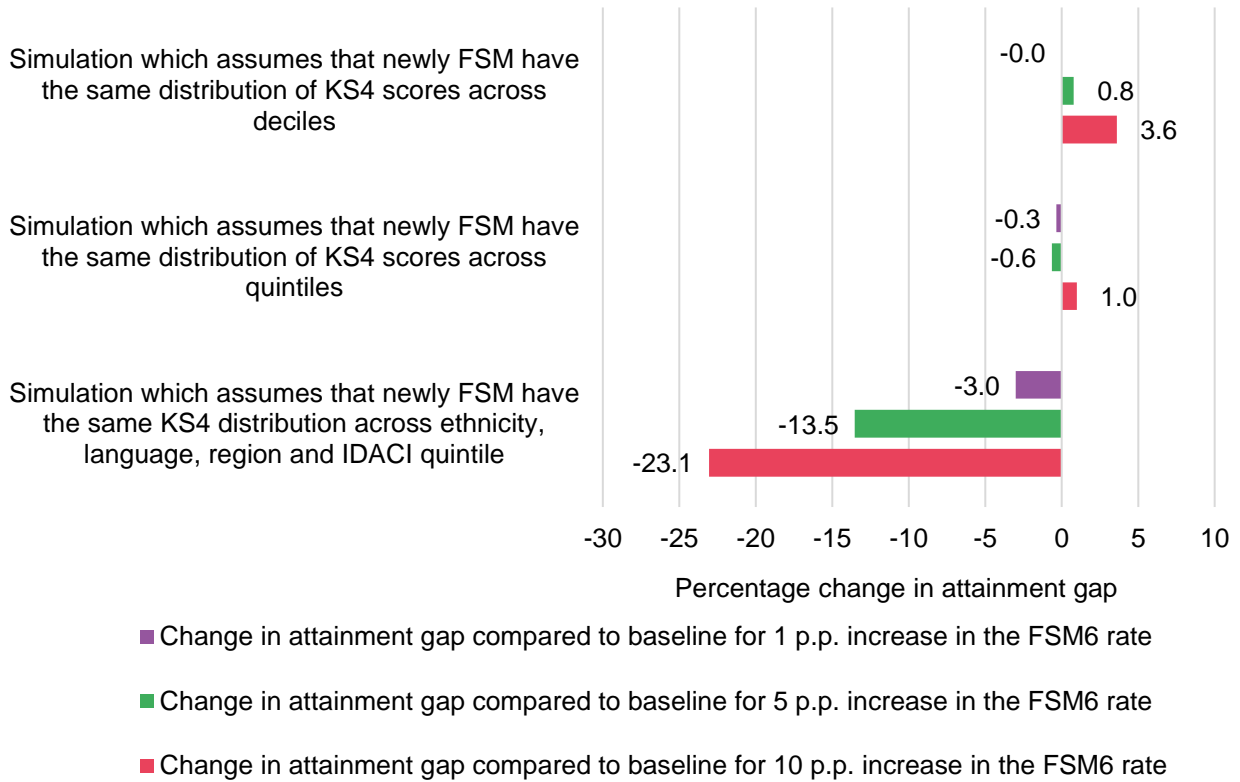
The first two scenarios use the KS2 attainment scores of the pupils becoming newly FSM6 to explore how a change in the FSM6 rate is likely to impact the measurement of the attainment gap. They show that, if the pupils becoming newly disadvantaged have similar KS2 attainment to those who became newly disadvantaged during the pandemic, then an increase in disadvantage is likely to mean that the attainment gap will appear to widen – even if pupil attainment is unchanged.

However, this finding depends critically on the assumptions that the newly disadvantaged have similar KS2 attainment to those who became newly disadvantaged during the pandemic. The final scenario uses pupil characteristics other than attainment (ethnicity, language, region and IDACI quintile) to simulate the effect of an increase in the FSM6 rate on the disadvantaged attainment gap. In this scenario, we find the opposite result. An increase in the number of newly FSM6 pupils is likely to mean that the attainment gap will appear to shrink – even if pupil attainment is unchanged.

Together with Table 5, this demonstrates that, while recent and anticipated increases in FSM6 rates are likely to mean that (without there being any changes in attainment for individual pupils) the KS2 attainment gap for future cohorts will change, it is not possible to predict the direction or

size of the change. Further, similar dynamics hold for the KS4 attainment gap (see Appendix III for further details).

Figure 18: Percentage change in the KS2 attainment gap, corresponding to different simulation scenarios



Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database

Appendix III: KS4 attainment gap

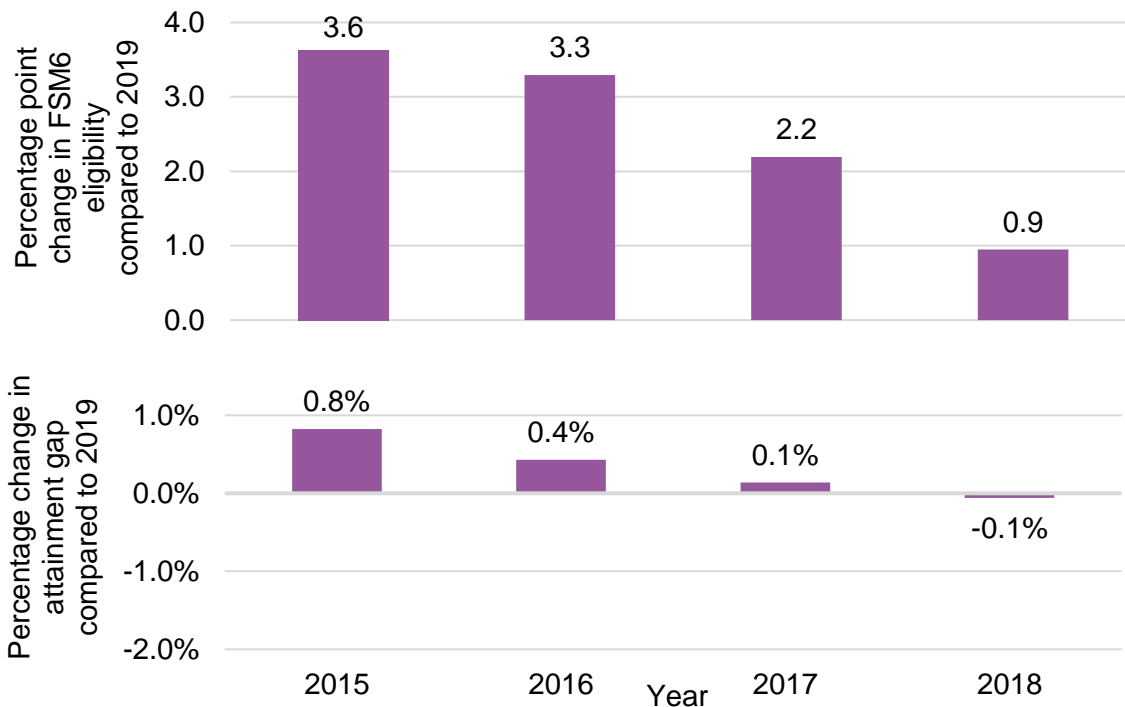
This section investigates whether the findings outlined in Appendix II are generalisable to the KS4 attainment gap. This is done by replicating the two methods ('Within-cohort variation' and 'Simulating changes in the FSM6 rate') outlined in Appendix II on the KS4 attainment gap.

Within-cohort variation

As outlined in Appendix II, our first analysis considers how the 2019 attainment gap would have changed if we vary which pupils are defined as 'disadvantaged' in the calculation of the gap, whilst holding each pupil's exam attainment fixed. As we are keeping pupil exam attainment fixed, this enables us to isolate how changes in the FSM6 status of pupils impact on the attainment gap measure.

The first panel of Figure 19 presents how the FSM6 rate of the 2019 Year 11 cohort changes depending on the year in which the FSM6 status of pupils is measured. It shows that the FSM6 eligibility rate of the 2019 Year 11 cohort was highest in 2015. The second panel of Figure 19 shows how the attainment gap varies depending on the year in which the FSM6 status of pupils is measured. Together, the panels show that, while the FSM6 rate of this cohort was higher in both 2017 and 2018 compared to 2019, the attainment gap is smaller using the 2018 FSM6 rate but larger using the 2017 rate. This shows that – as with the KS2 attainment gap - the size of the KS4 attainment gap is very sensitive to the point at which a pupil's FSM6 status is observed.

Figure 19: Change in FSM6 for 2019 Year 11 cohort, by FSM6 status between 2015 and 2019



Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database

Simulating changes in the FSM6 rate

Our second analysis explores how increasing the FSM6 rate by different magnitudes may impact the size of the attainment gap, as outlined by Appendix II.

First, we consider how the 2018/19 KS2 attainment gap varies with:

- increasing the FSM6 rate by different magnitudes and;
- the average attainment of the pupils becoming newly FSM6.

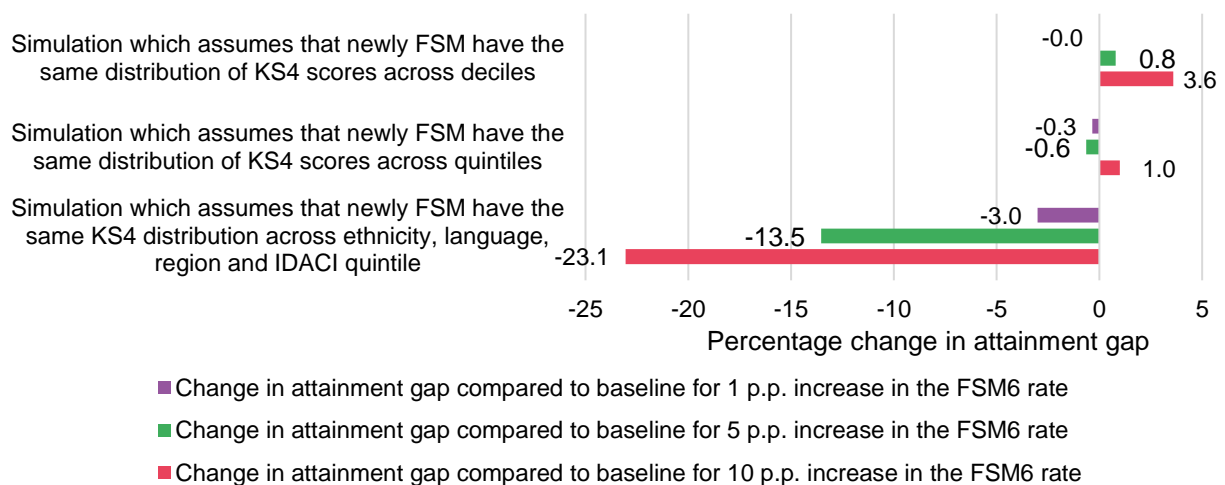
The results, which are presented in Table 6, show that the direction and size of a change in the KS4 attainment gap is heavily dependent on both the average attainment of those becoming newly FSM6, and the size of the group becoming newly FSM6. This demonstrates that the findings outlined in Appendix II are generalisable to the KS4 attainment gap.

Second, we draw on the 2018/19 KS4 attainment data to consider how the attainment gap is likely to change for different increases in the FSM6 rate (while holding pupil attainment fixed). As in Appendix II, we simulate this by using the characteristics of the pupils who became newly eligible for FSM6 between 2017 and 2019 to explore the impact of anticipated increases in the pupils becoming newly FSM6, based on the assumption that current trends continue.

Figure 20 presents the percentage change in the KS4 attainment gap using three different scenarios. These scenarios assume that the pupils who become FSM6 in future are 'similar' to those who became FSM6 before the pandemic. Across each scenario, a different set of characteristics is used to simulate which pupils might become FSM6 in future.

Together with Table 6, this demonstrates that, while recent and anticipated increases in FSM6 rates are likely to mean that (without there being any changes in attainment for individual pupils) the KS4 attainment gap for future cohorts will change, it is not possible to predict the direction or size of the change.

Figure 20: Percentage change in the KS4 attainment gap, corresponding to different simulation scenarios



Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database

Table 6 Percentage change in the KS4 attainment gap, corresponding to a given increase in the FSM6 rate and the attainment of newly FSM pupils

| Mean attainment rank percentile of newly FSM6 group | Percentage point change in size of newly FSM6 group | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|--------|----------|--------|----------|--------|----------|--------|----------|--------|----------|--------|----------|--------|----------|--------|----------|--------|----------|---------|
| | 0.5 p.p. | 1 p.p. | 1.5 p.p. | 2 p.p. | 2.5 p.p. | 3 p.p. | 3.5 p.p. | 4 p.p. | 4.5 p.p. | 5 p.p. | 5.5 p.p. | 6 p.p. | 6.5 p.p. | 7 p.p. | 7.5 p.p. | 8 p.p. | 8.5 p.p. | 9 p.p. | 9.5 p.p. | 10 p.p. |
| 37% | 0.6% | 1.2% | 1.8% | 2.4% | 3.0% | 3.7% | 4.3% | 5.0% | 5.6% | 6.3% | 7.0% | 7.7% | 8.5% | 9.2% | 10.0% | 10.7% | 11.5% | 12.3% | 13.1% | 13.9% |
| 38% | 0.4% | 0.9% | 1.3% | 1.8% | 2.3% | 2.8% | 3.4% | 3.9% | 4.4% | 5.0% | 5.6% | 6.2% | 6.8% | 7.4% | 8.0% | 8.7% | 9.4% | 10.0% | 10.7% | 11.4% |
| 39% | 0.3% | 0.6% | 0.9% | 1.3% | 1.6% | 2.0% | 2.4% | 2.8% | 3.2% | 3.7% | 4.1% | 4.6% | 5.1% | 5.6% | 6.1% | 6.7% | 7.2% | 7.8% | 8.4% | 9.0% |
| 40% | 0.1% | 0.3% | 0.5% | 0.7% | 0.9% | 1.2% | 1.4% | 1.7% | 2.0% | 2.3% | 2.7% | 3.0% | 3.4% | 3.8% | 4.2% | 4.6% | 5.1% | 5.5% | 6.0% | 6.5% |
| 41% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.1% | 0.1% | 0.2% | 0.3% | 0.5% | 0.6% | 0.8% | 1.0% | 1.2% | 1.5% | 1.7% | 2.0% | 2.3% | 2.6% | 2.9% | 3.3% | 3.7% | 4.1% |
| 42% | -0.2% | -0.3% | -0.4% | -0.4% | -0.5% | -0.5% | -0.5% | -0.5% | -0.4% | -0.3% | -0.2% | -0.1% | 0.0% | 0.2% | 0.4% | 0.6% | 0.8% | 1.1% | 1.3% | 1.6% |
| 43% | -0.3% | -0.6% | -0.8% | -1.0% | -1.2% | -1.3% | -1.4% | -1.5% | -1.6% | -1.7% | -1.7% | -1.7% | -1.6% | -1.6% | -1.5% | -1.4% | -1.3% | -1.2% | -1.0% | -0.9% |
| 44% | -0.4% | -0.9% | -1.2% | -1.6% | -1.9% | -2.2% | -2.4% | -2.6% | -2.8% | -3.0% | -3.1% | -3.2% | -3.3% | -3.4% | -3.4% | -3.5% | -3.5% | -3.4% | -3.4% | -3.3% |
| 45% | -0.6% | -1.1% | -1.7% | -2.1% | -2.6% | -3.0% | -3.4% | -3.7% | -4.0% | -4.3% | -4.6% | -4.8% | -5.0% | -5.2% | -5.4% | -5.5% | -5.6% | -5.7% | -5.8% | -5.8% |
| 46% | -0.7% | -1.4% | -2.1% | -2.7% | -3.3% | -3.8% | -4.3% | -4.8% | -5.2% | -5.6% | -6.0% | -6.4% | -6.7% | -7.0% | -7.3% | -7.5% | -7.7% | -7.9% | -8.1% | -8.3% |
| 47% | -0.9% | -1.7% | -2.5% | -3.3% | -4.0% | -4.7% | -5.3% | -5.9% | -6.5% | -7.0% | -7.5% | -7.9% | -8.4% | -8.8% | -9.2% | -9.5% | -9.9% | -10.2% | -10.5% | -10.7% |
| 48% | -1.0% | -2.0% | -3.0% | -3.8% | -4.7% | -5.5% | -6.2% | -7.0% | -7.7% | -8.3% | -8.9% | -9.5% | -10.1% | -10.6% | -11.1% | -11.6% | -12.0% | -12.4% | -12.8% | -13.2% |
| 49% | -1.2% | -2.3% | -3.4% | -4.4% | -5.4% | -6.3% | -7.2% | -8.1% | -8.9% | -9.6% | -10.4% | -11.1% | -11.8% | -12.4% | -13.0% | -13.6% | -14.1% | -14.7% | -15.2% | -15.6% |
| 50% | -1.3% | -2.6% | -3.8% | -5.0% | -6.1% | -7.2% | -8.2% | -9.1% | -10.1% | -11.0% | -11.8% | -12.7% | -13.4% | -14.2% | -14.9% | -15.6% | -16.3% | -16.9% | -17.5% | -18.1% |
| 51% | -1.5% | -2.9% | -4.2% | -5.5% | -6.8% | -8.0% | -9.1% | -10.2% | -11.3% | -12.3% | -13.3% | -14.2% | -15.1% | -16.0% | -16.8% | -17.6% | -18.4% | -19.2% | -19.9% | -20.6% |
| 52% | -1.6% | -3.2% | -4.7% | -6.1% | -7.5% | -8.8% | -10.1% | -11.3% | -12.5% | -13.6% | -14.7% | -15.8% | -16.8% | -17.8% | -18.8% | -19.7% | -20.6% | -21.4% | -22.2% | -23.0% |
| 53% | -1.8% | -3.5% | -5.1% | -6.7% | -8.2% | -9.6% | -11.0% | -12.4% | -13.7% | -15.0% | -16.2% | -17.4% | -18.5% | -19.6% | -20.7% | -21.7% | -22.7% | -23.7% | -24.6% | -25.5% |

Source: NFER analysis based on National Pupil Database

Glossary

Free school meals (FSM) eligible pupil: A pupil who meets the eligibility criteria for free school meals, and whose parent(s) or carer(s) makes a claim (eligibility is not determined automatically). The FSM rate refers to the share of FSM-eligible pupils in the pupil population.

Eligible for free school meals in the last six years (FSM6) pupil: A pupil who has been eligible for free schools meals at any point in the last six years. The FSM6 rate refers to the share of FSM6 pupils in the pupil population.

Newly FSM: A pupil who was eligible for FSM in a given year (January 2021), but was not eligible for FSM in the previous year (January 2020).

Remained FSM: A pupil who was eligible for FSM in both a given year and in the previous year (January 2020 and 2021).

Not FSM: A pupil who was neither eligible for FSM in a given year or in the previous year (January 2020 and 2021).

Pupil premium (PP) pupil: PP pupils are considered to be ‘disadvantaged’ and attract additional funding for their school to improve their educational outcomes. Any pupil who is either currently FSM6, has been in the care of the local authority at any point or is from a service family is PP.

Looked after child (LAC): A pupil who has been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours.

Universal Credit (UC): A means-tested benefit for people of working-age who are on a low income.

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Public

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The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ
T: +44 (0)1753 574123 • F: +44 (0)1753 691632 • enquiries@nfer.ac.uk

www.nfer.ac.uk

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