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**School buildings**

* **More than 1.5 million children are studying in dilapidated school buildings**, an investigation has found. It found that one in six schoolchildren were studying in schools that either needed major work or were in a relatively poor condition. Almost half of those were in schools that the government or regulatory body has deemed to be unsafe or ageing and in need of major refurbishment. The problem was worst in the Midlands, where 30% of schools were found to be either unsafe, ageing or blighted by a large number of defects relative to their size. Meanwhile, there are signs that government schemes to rectify the problem are struggling to do so. The school rebuilding programme, launched in 2022 with a target of 50 schools a year, had completed work on just 24 schools by the end of September. See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/dec/27/revealed-children-in-england-studying-in-unfit-school-buildings-crumbling-infrastructure>
* **Ministers have ordered intrusive structural surveys of a group of ageing, postwar school buildings in England amid mounting concern about hidden defects that could lead to structural failures**. After the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (Raac) crisis, which closed schools and prompted mass inspections, the government is concerned about thousands of “system-built” school structures that could pose a safety risk. A report by the National Audit Office last year identified 3,600 system-built school blocks out of a total of 13,800 that “may be more susceptible to deterioration”. After months of delays, contractors have finally been appointed to investigate the buildings, which were constructed between 1945 and 1990 and have outlived their design life. Experts said it was almost inevitable that some schools would be found not to meet safety standards and need to close. Construction experts say part of the problem is that so little is known about the methods and materials used when the “system-built” schools were erected, cheaply, at speed and often with few records, after the devastation of the second world war; there were more than 100 types of system builds involving different materials, manufacture processes and assembly methods. The DfE has previously identified Laingspan and Intergrid system builds as potentially problematic after two urgent school building closures. A representative sample of about 100 postwar school buildings will be selected for full structural surveys and qualitative research. The team will then use modelling to map the prevalence of future structural risks and make recommendations on how to mitigate them. See <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/dec/29/safety-checks-postwar-system-built-school-buildings-england>

**Climate change**

* **School leavers have “very poor” understanding of key climate change concepts**, a “concerning” government study has found, reigniting calls for the topic to be given greater coverage in the curriculum. Year 11s were found to struggle with understanding the impact climate change could have on the UK, and how it is mitigated. The findings are from the DfE’s 2024 climate literacy survey of 522 Year 11 pupils, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/climate-literacy-amongst-school-leavers>
* The DfE survey found just over half (55 per cent) of school leavers remembered learning about climate change in their final year. But 17 per cent could not remember ever being taught about climate change, and 24 per cent said they were last taught about it when they were 15 or younger.
* The DfE survey found concepts such as net zero and the 1.5°C and 2°C climate change goals are “very poorly understood”
* It found “a substantial proportion” do not appreciate future global warming can still be limited
* There was also a “substantial knowledge gap” about the level of scientific consensus on climate change. Most Year 11s believed agreement amongst scientists to be “notably lower than it is”.
* The study found most school leavers (42 per cent) are “fairly concerned” about climate change, and 12 per cent were “very concerned”. But 35 per cent were either “not very concerned” or “not at all concerned”.

See <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/pupils-have-poor-climate-change-understanding-says-dfe-study/>

**Ofsted**

* **Ofsted’s trial inspections of schools from the first week of next term will be testing out new toolkits that are set to be part of the next inspection framework.** The trial inspections are set to run for several weeks until Ofsted launches its official consultation on its new framework towards the end of January. Findings from these trial inspections of volunteer schools will not be published as they are part of Ofsted’s informal engagement ahead of the consultation launch. See <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/ofsted-trials-will-test-new-inspection-toolkits>
* **A research expert has questioned how Ofsted can reliably inspect teaching**, after a new study showed that observers assessing the same lesson can produce different findings. It found that when two observers are making judgements about the same lessons, there are only “moderate levels of agreement”. Judging teaching quality, even for experts looking at the same lesson and with very clear criteria, is “really hard to do”. “Given the limited time Ofsted has to inspect, and often small inspection teams, I don’t think they could judge teaching from lesson observations with a high enough degree of consistency or reliability”. See <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/ofsted-inspections-teaching-quality-could-risk-discrepancies>

**SEND**

* **The Local Government Association has called for “urgent” government action after promised clarity for councils on the brink of collapse over SEND deficits was delayed**. Local authorities have been allowed to keep high needs budgets sitting off their balance sheets since 2020. Now the DfE has only said ““The government intends to set out plans for reforming the SEND system in further detail next year”. See <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/councils-kept-waiting-on-key-send-deficit-override-decision/>

The Prime Minister said the deputy prime minister, Angela Rayner, has been in talks with councils over deficits driven by spending on special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); he said this would be resolved as soon as possible The prime minister was warned that there could be an “avalanche” of councils issuing 114 notices - effectively declaring bankruptcy - within two years.

* **The parliamentary education committee has launched and inquiry to find new solutions to the growing crisis in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision**, <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/8684/solving-the-send-crisis/> The probe will focus on how to stabilise the broken system short-term, and how to achieve “long-term sustainability with improved outcomes for children and young people”. For the call for evidence, see <https://committees.parliament.uk/call-for-evidence/3517>
* **More than £100m was spent last year by local authorities and the government on failed efforts to block support for children and young people with special educational needs in England**. The enormous cost in legal fees and staff resources came after councils won just 136 out of more than 10,000 tribunals in 2022-23, a success rate of 1.2%, as record numbers of families took to the courts to challenge councils over education, health and care plans (EHCPs). It has been said, “It’s hard to avoid the conclusion that local authorities must calculate, at some level, that it costs them less to contest tribunal appeals, even if they lose, than to provide every child and young person with what the law entitles them to as a matter of course – because the majority of families don’t [or] can’t appeal.” See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/dec/22/100m-spent-in-england-on-failed-efforts-to-block-childrens-send-support>

See also:

* ‘**The worst it’s ever been’: teachers decry Send crisis in England’s schools**”, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/dec/23/the-worst-its-ever-been-teachers-decry-send-crisis-in-englands-schools>
* “**Send provision in ‘vicious downward spiral’, says former children’s commissioner**”, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/dec/23/send-children-special-educational-needs-disabilities-anne-longfield>
* “‘**Fobbed off and rejected’: Send crisis takes toll on families in Birmingham**”, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/dec/22/send-crisis-takes-toll-families-birmingham>
* **“Spiralling demand and shrinking budgets: why England’s Send system is buckling”,** <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/dec/22/spiralling-demand-and-shrinking-budgets-why-englands-send-system-is-buckling>
* DfE has listed “**Independent schools for pupils with special educational needs or disabilities,** which have been approved under section 41 of the Children and Families Act”. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-special-schools-and-colleges>

**AI**

* **Schools should “embrace” artificial intelligence in three key areas**, delegates were told at a future-gazing event organised by an international schools group this month, a presentation from Simon Camby, group chief education officer at Cognita, which has around 100 schools in 16 countries.
* Planning takes teachers a long time but there are ways we could use AI to be more effective”.
* The potential to use AI to support student tutoring is “really an exciting area, but one that we have to get right”. Pilot projects at Cognita are due to start in January, but only with students aged over 13.
* Finding ways to use AI to support teachers and students with assessment of work” is another priority.

Five key points from **Cognita’s AI framework**:

* AI in education is “about complementing a really high-quality holistic education...not about replacing it”.
* Educators must “think really hard” about how to teach students about the “many, many ethical implications” of AI.
* Notions of criticality and analysis are extremely important - in other words, ensuring that students “don’t automatically trust content that is AI generated”.
* Schools must ensure that students display “academic honesty” - when, for example, they use AI in coursework for the International Baccalaureate, they should clearly cite it.
* Students should “understand that it’s not just what they get out of AI, it’s also what they put into it”, and that “their digital footprint is growing every time they use AI”.

See <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/3-ways-ai-can-help-education-schools>

**Behaviour and safety**

* The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change says resolving **the “burgeoning crisis of behaviour and safety” in English schools should be a top priority for ministers**, <https://institute.global/insights/public-services/tackling-the-behaviour-challenge-england-schools>
* It urges government to treat the lack of parental engagement as a safeguarding issue and to give schools the power to escalate concerns to other agencies or even sanction parents.
* Teachers should be given powers to sanction parents who fail to engage in efforts to halt the “rising epidemic of disruptive and dangerous behaviour” in schools
* Schools should be given a “stronger role in driving multi-agency working, with a statutory partner role in safeguarding”.
* A “national behaviour challenge” should be set an overarching objective of boosting wellbeing, raising attendance and cutting classroom disruption by half by the end of this parliament, with “safeguards against the gaming of those objectives”. The report says the first step should be to collect “much richer and more up-to-date data” than is currently available, and to start sharing this so schools, academy trusts, local authorities and other relevant agencies can begin to make use of it. Regular surveys of pupils and staff should be conducted in each school, with the data made available
* The government should put in place data-collection tools and practices to provide an “accurate present-time picture” of behaviour and wellbeing in schools. This could inform a “revamped peer-led support system” in which schools are “benchmarked more precisely”. The government should introduce a “national data infrastructure” centred on a digital learner ID, built and maintained by an independent designated data body.

**From the DfE**

* For a very good summary, “**Schools bill: All 39 proposed policies (and when they’ll start)”**. See <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/schools-bill-all-39-proposed-policies-and-when-theyll-start/>
* **All state school teachers in England should be given the right to work away from the classroom on lesson preparation, marking and pupil assessment to stem a growing retention crisis in the profession**, the education secretary has said; it was vital more schools offered teachers some flexible working away from the classroom as is already the case in many academy schools, without reducing contact time with pupils. See <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/dec/21/uk-teachers-should-be-allowed-to-work-from-home-education-secretary-says>

**Health and welfare of children and young people**

* **Councils are treating teenagers like homeless adults and placing them in unsuitable temporary housing rather than taking them into care**, new research has shown. Local authorities are “waiting out the clock” when assessing vulnerable 16- and 17-year-olds until they can be classed as adults. The teenagers were kept in the dark about their rights after escaping “harrowing” family situations involving physical and emotional abuse, addiction and mental health problems, according to research by the Coram Institute for Children charity. The charity said that cash-strapped councils often failed to house these children at all, or treated them like adults requiring housing, knowing that once they turned 18 the council would have fewer obligations to support them if they weren’t classed as care leavers. See <https://www.coram.org.uk/news/door-is-still-closed/>
* **Teenage girls are outdrinking their male peers in the UK at a greater rate than in any other European country**, according to research. More than a third of 15-year-old girls in the UK report getting repeatedly drunk, compared with less than a quarter of boys the same age, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found, <https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/health-at-a-glance-europe-2024_b3704e14-en.html> It is unclear why British girls appear more susceptible than boys to getting drunk regularly, but it could be connected to marketing and trends among adults. It is thought anxiety and low mood could be a factor in the findings. Britain scored lowest for life satisfaction among teenagers in Europe in research published last year, with girls particularly affected. This “happiness recession” could be having an effect on teenage drinking habits. It is possible there is a link “between girls experiencing higher levels of anxiety and social anxiety and using alcohol that way”. “Perhaps they’re using it to manage their emotions and their psychological functioning at the loss of any other strategies … People drink when they feel low to help themselves feel better. Of course, alcohol is a depressant, but teens don’t know that.” See <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/31/british-teenage-girls-outdrink-boys-of-the-same-age-study-finds>
* **There has been an increase in the number of children across England needing specialist treatment for severe mental health crises**, according to new NHS data. Overall, there has been a 10 per cent rise in emergency, very urgent and urgent referrals for under-18s, with the total increasing to 34,793 between April and October 2024, up from 31,749 in the same period the previous year. Overall, the data, analysed by the charity YoungMinds, reveals that there were:
	+ 4,424 new “very urgent referrals” for under-18s to mental health crisis care teams between April 2024 and October 2024, up 13 per cent from the same period in the previous year.
	+ 24,886 new “urgent referrals” to crisis care teams between April and October, up 13 per cent from the same period the year before.
	+ 5,483 new “emergency referrals” to crisis care teams between April and October, down 5 per cent from the same period the previous year.

See <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/rise-pupils-needing-severe-mental-health-crisis-support>

**Young Minds offers a range of free resources to help schools**. See <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/>

**School and academy management**

* DfE has updated its manual, “**Complete the school census**”. See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/complete-the-school-census>
* DfE has issued “Technical specification and validation rules for submitting **2024 to 2025 school census data**”. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-census-2024-to-2025-technical-information>
* DfE has issued “Successful applicants who applied to the **Trust Capacity Fund** in the 2019 to 2025 funding rounds”. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/trust-capacity-fund-tcaf-award-recipients> Window 3 of the Trust Capacity Fund (TCaF) was the last time this funding was handed out to multi-academy trusts (MATs) after the Labour government made the decision to scrap it in November. This reveals that while £30 million was applied for, just £12 million was awarded from a total of 89 bids. The average gap between the amount of TCaF money that trusts bid for and what they got grew by 183 per cent between 2022-23 and window 3 of the 2023-25 funding. In the final round trusts got, on average, just 40 per cent of the money they applied for.
* DfE has updated “Lists of **qualifications that meet DfE's criteria for counting in the early years foundation stage framework staff/child ratios**”. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-qualifications-achieved-in-england>
* DfE has issued “**Providers delivering Higher Technical Qualifications**. Lists approved Higher Technical Qualifications and the providers that can offer them from September 2024”. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/list-of-higher-technical-qualifications>

**Education news for schools**

* Former union leader **Mary Bousted** and ex-children’s commissioner **Anne Longfield** will be made peers. The pair will sit in the House of Lords and be given the title Baroness
* For a list of those connected with schools and education receiving **new year’s honour**s, see <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/12/the-kings-new-year-honours-list-2025-honours-for-contributions-to-education-skills-and-childrens-social-care/>
* **The government has accused critics of its plan to put VAT on private school fees of being detached from the real world after polling showed the policy, which will come into force on 1 January, is strongly backed by the public**. The poll, commissioned by the Private Education Policy Forum (PEPF) thinktank, found that 54% of people backed the idea, with 22% opposing it. See <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/dec/31/labours-private-school-tax-plan-strongly-backed-by-public-poll-shows>
* For an article “‘They see it is living’: Durham professor’s mission to **get more pupils into classics**”, see <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/jan/02/durham-professor-mission-classics-classical-education>

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