



Foreword from NFER CEO, Carole Willis

Over the past year, the education system has faced a set of challenges that are both urgent and deeply interconnected. These include changing demographics, workforce pressures and a labour market being reshaped by technology.

At NFER, our purpose is clear. We generate high quality and timely evidence and put it into the hands of those who can use it to improve outcomes for children and young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This impact review sets out how we have done that. We concluded The Skills Imperative 2035, our most significant strategic programme of research to date, identifying the essential employment skills people will need in the years ahead and highlighting the risks that those with lower attainment and fewer opportunities could be left behind as entry level roles decline. By working closely with policymakers and system leaders, we have helped ensure these findings inform thinking on post 16 pathways, careers and lifelong learning.

We also strengthened our contribution on education workforce issues, from the teacher labour market and supply challenge to the early years workforce, providing analysis that has supported parliamentary scrutiny and informed national debate. Alongside this, our work on falling pupil numbers has improved understanding of the implications for school funding, staffing and the sustainability of provision. Internationally, we continue to work with partners to strengthen national assessment systems and build sustainable local expertise.

Impact is ultimately felt in classrooms and in the experiences of children and young people. Our NFER Online Assessments continue to provide primary schools with practical, high-quality resources that help teachers understand learning, target support and reduce workload.

None of this would be possible without our funders, partners and stakeholders, and above all the schools, teachers, parents and young people who give their time so generously. I am grateful for their support and proud of what we are achieving together.



Our impact is made possible by the continued support of our funders and research partners including:

Cambridge Econometrics
Department for Education
Education Endowment Foundation
Education Out Loud
Gatsby Charitable Foundation
Hg Foundation
Learning and Work Institute
Manchester Metropolitan University
Mission 44
National Centre for Social Research
Nuffield Foundation

Sutton Trust
UK Research and Innovation
UNESCO
University of Roehampton
University of Sheffield
University of Westminster
Verian
Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
Warwick Institute for Employment Research
Youth Futures Foundation

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The year in numbers

113,000

unique visitors
to NFER website

17,400

downloads of NFER
reports and resources

5,061

teachers and school
leaders took part in
research, assessment
trials and products

66,000

total followers
on social media

4,125

publicly-funded
schools took part
in our research and
assessment trials

818,309

pupils took part in
research, assessment
trials and products



The research findings from NFER are constantly useful to our work. We base a number of news reports on NFER findings and we also cite NFER research regularly within our best practice articles, especially the work on teacher recruitment and retention and Pupil Premium.

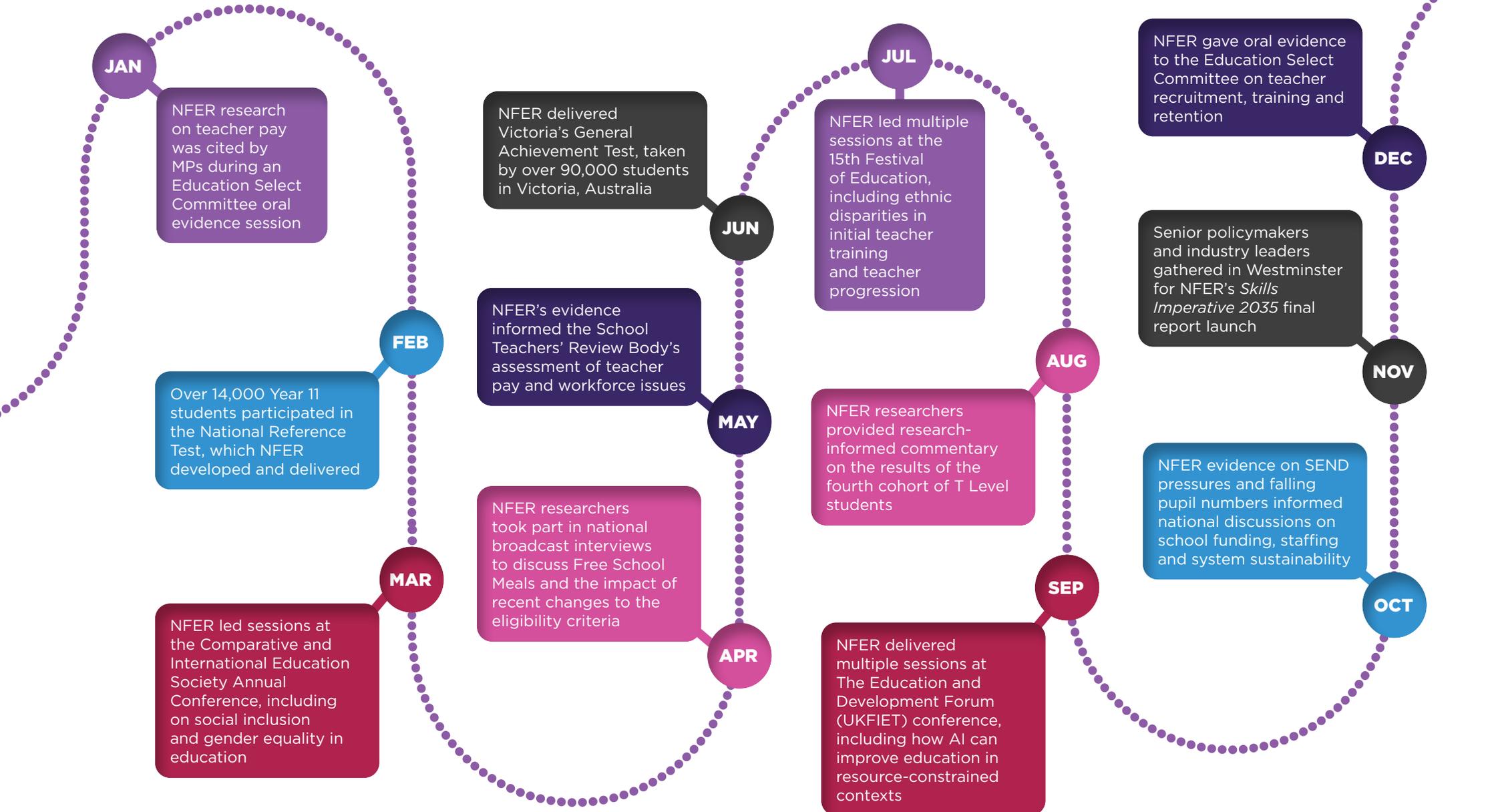
Pete Henshaw, Editor, SecEd and Headteacher Update

Our impact

At NFER, our research and insights drive real improvements in education for children and young people. We focus on the issues where evidence can have the greatest impact – informing policy decisions, shaping debates, and strengthening practice in classrooms and across education systems.



Highlights



Engagement and influence

NFER develops insights and policy recommendations to improve the lives of children and young people. We share our evidence with policymakers through a range of channels, including submissions to government consultations and select committee inquiries, meetings with parliamentarians, and briefing papers circulated ahead of parliamentary debates. In 2025, this included engagement on key legislation such as the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, as well as major consultations including the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

This year, we published constituency-level infographics to help MPs in England engage with education policy, sharing local data on Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility, attainment outcomes, persistent absence rates and more. This supports our aim to ensure education remains a priority for government and parliamentarians.

Our research continued to inform political debate, with evidence cited in questions to the Secretary of State for Education, referenced in parliamentary debates, including the Budget, and used in Select Committee hearings. Our impartiality underpins the credibility and independence of our research, and we engage across the political spectrum, including at major party conferences.

NFER experts also spoke at national and international events on topics including skills, the education workforce, AI, apprenticeship participation and life-skills assessment in low-resource settings. In November we held our annual reception at the Houses of Parliament, kindly hosted by Helen Hayes MP, bringing together stakeholders from across the sector.

We continue to examine the impact of classroom practices so that schools, colleges and early years settings have clear evidence on which approaches can most benefit their students, working closely with the Education Endowment Foundation and other funders. We also draw out insights from our wider research for leaders and teachers, sharing them through our Research Bites series, conferences, blogs and wider stakeholder engagement.



A recent study by NFER forecast that up to 3 million jobs could disappear by 2035. Employment in sales and customer service occupations has fallen by more than 10% since 2021, and around 12 million people in England currently work in occupations deemed to be in decline.

John Hayes MP, Chair of the All-party Parliamentary Group on Skills



There are 1,800 school support staff workers in my constituency of Birmingham Northfield, and they deserve better. Most schools struggle to recruit for those roles, according to research by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

Laurence Turner MP



Shaping national policy on teacher supply

The system challenge

The school system in England faces a substantial challenge in ensuring sufficient numbers of high-quality teachers across all subjects and regions. A strong teaching workforce is the basis of efforts to improve pupils' education and learning.

Research and insights

We provided leading independent analysis of the teacher labour market through our annual Teacher Labour Market in England report, and ongoing commentary. Our research examined recruitment to initial teacher training (ITT), retention, pay competitiveness and working conditions, and assessed the implications for delivering the government's pledge to recruit 6,500 additional teachers.

Shared findings and evidence

Our analysis and expert commentary was covered widely across national broadcast and print media, including the BBC, The Guardian and The Telegraph, often following government data releases and announcements. We also engaged directly with policymakers through briefings, stakeholder discussions, webinars and formal consultation responses.

Influenced policy and practice

- The Education Select Committee and Parliament drew on NFER analysis through written and oral evidence.
- NFER research cited by the School Teachers' Review Body and the National Audit Office.
- NFER research on ethnic disparities in the teacher workforce is now being used in professional training for initial teacher training providers.

Impact

Decisions on teacher recruitment and pay reflect a range of political and fiscal considerations. Within this context, NFER's analysis formed part of the evidence base considered by ministers, officials and advisory bodies when assessing options to address teacher shortages. This included the Government's decision to increase teachers' pay by four per cent in England in 2025.

RESEARCH PARTNER

The Nuffield Foundation

THE TIMES

Teacher vacancies hit new high as workload and pay put off recruits
The Times, March 2025

The Guardian

Action urged to boost 'perilous' teacher numbers in England
Guardian, March 2025



The annual update on the teacher labour market led by Jack Worth makes for sobering reading on the extent of the challenge to recruit and retain high quality teachers — vital to an education system that can equalise opportunities.

UCL Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities

BBC NEWS

Jack Worth, NFER Workforce lead, discussed teacher labour market challenges on Radio 4's Today Programme, BBC Breakfast and 5 Live Breakfast

tes

7 in 10 primaries expect budget deficits as pupil numbers fall
TES, September 2025

Understanding the impact of changing pupil numbers

The system challenge

Falling and unevenly distributed pupil numbers are creating growing pressures for schools and local systems. As rolls decline in some areas and remain high in others, leaders face difficult decisions about staffing, class sizes and budgets, with significant risks for financial sustainability and educational provision.

Research and insights

NFER undertook new analysis of actual and projected changes in pupil numbers and explored the implications for schools. This included linking demographic change to patterns in class sizes, staffing and school finances, and considering the steps that school leaders are taking in response to demographic change. This work provided a clear, timely picture of how changes in the school-age population are already affecting schools and where pressures are likely to intensify.

Shared findings and evidence

We shared our insights through blogs, briefings and public engagement, helping school leaders, policymakers and the wider sector understand the scale and consequences of demographic change. Our analysis was widely reported in national and sector media, and NFER researchers presented the findings at conferences including the Schools and Academies Show. We also engaged directly with the Department for Education and key sector bodies.

Influenced policy and practice

- Sector bodies, including unions, cited NFER research in policy responses and presentations.

Impact

NFER's projections have strengthened the national evidence base on demographic change at a time when pupil numbers and future school rolls are a pressing challenge for the sector. By clarifying the links between demography, staffing and budgets, our work is supporting more informed debate about how the system can adapt and prepare for changing pupil numbers.



INDEPENDENT

Dozens of schools close due to lack of pupils
Independent, October 2025



Meeting the skills challenge of the future

Over the past five years, NFER has led a major strategic programme of research to identify the essential employment skills (EES) people will need by 2035 and what this means for education, training and careers policy. This year marked the conclusion of that work.

These changes do not affect everyone equally. Our analysis shows that 12 million adults work in occupations likely to decline by 2035 and face barriers to moving into higher-skilled jobs. Young people with lower skills and qualifications also face fewer low and mid-skilled jobs and a slowdown in hiring. Ensuring these changes do not widen inequality has been a central focus of our work.

Turning evidence into policy relevant insight

Our programme combined labour-market modelling, education-pathway analysis and employer insights to give policymakers a clearer view of emerging risks and opportunities. It highlighted not only which jobs are growing or declining, but the rising importance of skills like communication, collaboration and problem-solving across all sectors.

These findings informed government, employer and education-sector thinking on workforce planning, childhood skills and lifelong learning. Throughout the year, NFER shared insights with senior civil servants and ministers through briefings, roundtables, events and consultation responses, and our evidence featured in national skills analysis, including reports by Skills England.



Carole Willis featured on The Rest is Money podcast to discuss the vital role schools and employers play in shaping the future workforce.

Informing national debate

Alongside our policy engagement, our analysis helped reframe the public debate on skills. The final report received extensive national and sector media coverage, including the Financial Times, BBC News and a feature with our Chief Executive on The Rest is Money podcast.

We also hosted a high-profile Westminster event chaired by the BBC's Steph McGovern, bringing together policymakers, employers and education leaders to discuss how the education and skills system can respond. The event created a shared space for evidence-based debate on supporting young people and adults as jobs and skills requirements evolve.



Jude Hillary discussed the report's key finding on The Context



The Skills Imperative has significantly advanced our understanding of EES and how to value, develop, and support them. Through a structured, data-driven research programme, it projected future skills demand in a technology-driven labour market, identified the most critical skills, assessed supply and gaps across different groups, and examined the factors shaping young people's skill development.

Josh Hillman, Director of Education at the Nuffield Foundation





Fantastic and comprehensive study making a clear contribution on the evidence for the skill needs for our future. Congratulations to all involved, was brilliant to be on the advisory board.

Becci Newton, Director, Public Policy and Research, Institute for Employment Studies



Understanding what skills we need for our future workforce is absolutely crucial for economic prosperity. Too many people are in danger of being left behind if we don't sort out our education system in this country. I really hope that policy makers will listen carefully to what has been recommended by the excellent work of NFER's The Skills Imperative 2035

Steph McGovern, broadcaster



From research to system change

This work has reinforced the case for a more joined-up, lifelong learning system that supports young people into growth sectors, helps adults retrain, and ensures essential employment skills are developed throughout education and working life. We also highlighted the need to align education policy, employer behaviour and funding so opportunity keeps pace with economic change.

Our research on technology careers showed how education routes, hiring patterns and emerging technologies are reshaping access to a key growth sector, helping policymakers and practitioners understand where opportunities are opening and where targeted support is needed.

Together, these insights are helping decision-makers look beyond short-term skills shortages and focus on building a sustainable, inclusive workforce for the future.

RESEARCH PARTNER

The Nuffield Foundation



Creating national capacity for high-quality assessment

The system challenge

Education systems around the world are working to strengthen their capacity to design, deliver and use high-quality national assessments. This is particularly important for curriculum reform, system monitoring and benchmarking, where robust evidence on learning outcomes, trends and gaps between pupil groups is needed to inform policy and practice.

Developed tools and resources

We work with ministries of education, exam councils and development partners to strengthen assessment quality and national systems. In Zanzibar, we supported new large-scale assessments for Grades 4 and 9, creating a national framework and building capacity across the full assessment cycle. In Kenya, we supported assessment reform under the new curriculum, including training in competency-based assessment and psychometrics, and contributed to the development of a regional assessment resource centre.

We also supported governments in Iraq and Belize to strengthen their assessment systems, produced a policy brief on the Program for the Analysis of Educational Systems (PASEC) to guide international stakeholders, and developed an assessment suite in The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau to enable long-term tracking of learning.

Influenced policy and practice through partnership

- Enhanced assessment and data quality for reporting and informing teaching and learning.
- Enabled national assessment bodies to lead the development and refinement of curriculum-aligned large-scale assessments.
- Empowered the establishment of new national and regional centre of excellence to support good assessment practices and data use.

Impact

Strengthening assessment systems is a long-term endeavour shaped by a range of contextual factors. Within this context, NFER's partnership-based approach contributed to sustainable national capability to generate and use reliable, comparable data on learning outcomes to inform decision-making over time.

RESEARCH PARTNERS

Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab

British Council

Effective Intervention

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

Kenya National Examinations Council

Teacher College, Columbia University

Zanzibar Ministry of Education and Vocational Training



SCHOOLS WEEK

Schools at 'breaking point' over SEND pressure as admission gap grows
Schools Week, November 2025

The Guardian

Some schools in England taking up to six times more special needs pupils than others
Independent, November 2025

Addressing pressures in mainstream SEND provision

The system challenge

The special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system is under severe strain, with rising need and an uneven distribution of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) across mainstream schools. When some schools take far higher numbers of pupils with additional needs, it creates pressure on staffing, funding and access to specialist support.

Produced relevant research and insights

This year, we published an interim report from an ongoing study examining how pupils with SEND are distributed across mainstream schools in England. Using national pupil data and interviews with local authority SEND leaders, these initial findings helped frame the issue, revealing that primary schools with the highest EHCP rates have more than six times the proportion of pupils with plans compared with those with the lowest rates. The work forms part of a wider programme to strengthen the evidence base on inclusion, resourcing and workforce capacity in SEND provision.

Shared findings and evidence

The analysis gained strong national and sector attention, including coverage in The Guardian and Schools Week. The level of media and stakeholder interest reflected the importance of SEND distribution as a system-wide issue.

Influenced policy and practice

- UK Parliament's POST horizon scan referenced NFER evidence in its discussion of pressures on the school workforce and implications for pupils with SEND.
- An expert advisory group helped to shape the work and ensured the findings were shared with key decision-makers in the SEND system.

Impact

NFER's research provided a robust and timely evidence base that policymakers, school leaders and local authorities used to frame discussions about fair access, inclusive practice and how resources are allocated across the system.

RESEARCH PARTNER

The Nuffield Foundation



Another fascinating piece of research out today that gives us pause for thought in the world of admissions.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) have found that schools with high overall levels of SEND (EHCP and SEND Support) tend to also have higher levels of deprivation.

Charley O'Regan, Senior Schools Engagement Manager, The Sutton Trust

Building a research community to strengthen youth transitions evidence



The system challenge

England has a growing range of linked administrative datasets with strong potential to improve understanding of young people's transitions through education and into employment. To realise this potential, there is a need to build research capability, align stakeholders around shared priorities, and support confident use of data to address key evidence gaps.

Explored key evidence gaps

NFER led a team of co-investigators to provide strategic research leadership on how administrative data could strengthen the youth transitions evidence base. Mapping research and datasets, combined with consultation, identified persistent gaps for under-researched groups and a lack of robust causal studies. These insights informed a shared set of research priorities with cross-sector buy-in.

Developed tools and resources

To address these gaps, we combined practical tools with sustained engagement. Outputs included a publicly accessible evidence gap map, an administrative data navigation tool and a growing youth transitions resource hub with reusable guidance and example code. We built skills and confidence among administrative data users through free data clinics, webinars, a national conference and a regular community newsletter.

Influenced meaningful engagement

- To date, individuals from over 150 organisations have actively engaged with the programme.
- At the national conference, 75 per cent of delegates reported making new connections to help strengthen the youth transitions evidence base.

Impact

Building effective research communities takes time and collaboration. NFER's leadership has helped create a more capable and connected youth-transitions research community, laying the foundations for sustained use of administrative data to inform decisions affecting young people over time.

RESEARCH PARTNERS

ADR UK

Youth Futures Foundation

Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education



NFER has provided strategic leadership in the area of youth transitions, including creating an evidence gap map and list of research priorities. They have also developed a community of interested stakeholders around youth transitions, and worked with partners to develop new tools to assist researchers, and provide training to build capability and capacity in the system for undertaking impactful research in this field.

Karen Powell, Head of Research Strategy and Commissioning, ADR England



I loved using NOA with the Year 3 pupils. It saved hugely on teacher time and the children had a positive test experience

School teacher

Bringing high-quality assessment into classrooms

High-quality classroom resources are essential for improving teaching and learning, but they also need to be practical and sustainable for schools to use. This year, NFER has continued to translate its assessment expertise into tools that support teachers to understand pupils' learning, target support more effectively and reduce unnecessary workload.

NFER Online Assessments (NOA)

NFER has now launched a full Key Stage 2 suite of online assessments in reading and maths, covering the autumn, spring and summer terms. Building on a successful earlier rollout for Years 3 and 4, the expanded offer supports pupils across their entire Key Stage 2 journey.

NOA combines age-appropriate, curriculum-aligned questions with an engaging online format, providing teachers with high-quality, standardised information for both diagnostic and summative assessment. This helps schools identify gaps in understanding, monitor progress and plan teaching more effectively.

Crucially, NOA also addresses one of the biggest pressures facing schools: workload. Around 70 per cent of questions are marked automatically, allowing teachers to focus their time on responding to pupils' needs rather than routine marking.

As adoption grows, the platform is helping more primary schools access reliable, easy-to-use assessment tools that support high-quality teaching and learning.





National Foundation for
Educational Research

Learn more about NFER

If you would like to know more about our research, our resources and our services, or about partnering with us in our work, please get in touch:

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In a world of unprecedented change and technological innovation, it is more important than ever that education policy and practice is informed by high-quality evidence.

NFER exists to create this evidence and get it into the hands of those who can use it to make a difference.

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