

SHADOW CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW

INTERIM REPORT

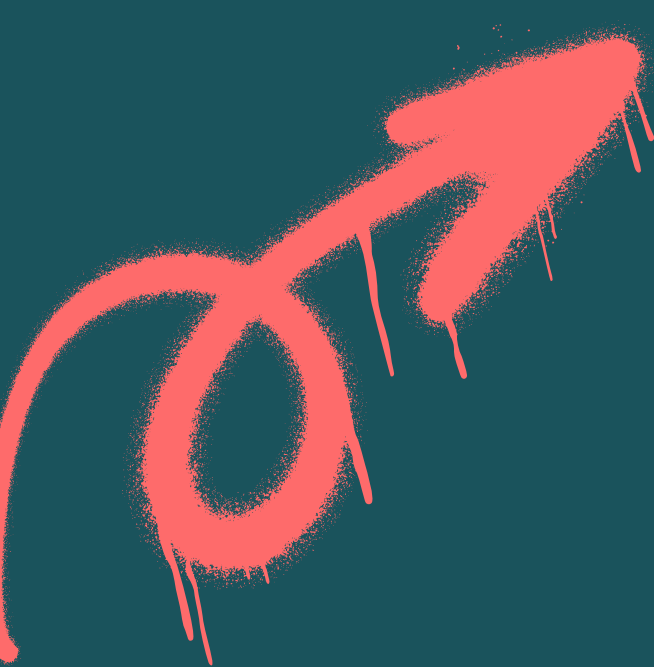
SUMMARISING OUR YOUTH-LED
CALL FOR EVIDENCE



Prepared by the
YOUTH SHADOW PANEL

January 2025

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MESSAGE FROM THE YOUTH SHADOW PANEL

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Context

The Shadow review is run by eleven [youth-led organisations](#) which collectively represent the voice of over 10.5 million young people. We are [youth representatives](#) from these organisations and make up the youth shadow panel. We are leading the Shadow review to **support and enhance the engagement of young people** in the official Curriculum and Assessment Review. We are working to ensure the best outcome for children and youth, and for the education system overall.

Youth voice matters, especially when it is us who will be directly affected by the changes made to what is taught in schools and how we are assessed. This report outlines our interim findings, informed by our call for evidence. We represent the views of young people aged 5 -19 across the English education system. As youth representatives, we have been gathering the perspectives of our peers and present these interim findings in this report.

We were not surprised by the results from our call for evidence since we have also experienced many of the things that young people reported to us. The most common perspectives from respondents included: wanting learning and assessments to be more interactive; assessments negatively affecting student mental health; and wanting learning to be more relevant to life. The call for evidence also showed that young people want to learn more about the world, culture, climate, finances and politics.

Thank you for sharing your perspectives, and thank you to the young people, teachers, parents and anyone else who encouraged and supported young people to share their views.

The youth shadow panel

INTRODUCTION

02

About our call for evidence

This report presents research from the youth shadow panel's call for evidence which was designed to investigate what KS1-KS5 students in England think about their learning and assessment.

- The call for evidence was open from 2 December 2024 - 12 January 2025.
- We received **556 responses** from young people of different backgrounds, from KS1 to KS5, and with different interests and abilities. [View page 12](#) for respondent demographics.
- The responses were submitted by individuals or on behalf of a group. Views were mostly shared as written responses in a short online survey. We also collected responses via social media and email in a range of formats, including photos, drawings, voice notes and videos.
- No specific topics or themes were mentioned in the research questions to avoid influencing what respondents might share.
- All responses were manually coded to identify the most common views from respondents, which have defined the themes of the findings and recommendations in this report.

We asked:

Thinking about what you learn in school/college...

- What do you enjoy learning about?
- What don't you enjoy learning about?
- What could be better about what you learn?

Thinking about how your learning is assessed (like exams, tests, projects or coursework)...

- What do you like about how your learning is assessed?
- What don't you like about how your learning is assessed?
- What could be better about how your learning is assessed?

Thinking about your education overall, do you have anything else you'd like to share which shows your views on what you learn and how your learning is assessed?

The following sections outline the headline findings and recommendations from our call for evidence. These are each broken down into the five most prominent topics: assessments, relevance to life, inclusion, climate and nature, and practical learning.

FINDINGS: ASSESSMENTS

03

Overreliance on exams causes stress for many students

- Respondents had mixed views on assessments, with some finding exams suitable and a fair way to assess students, however respondents **generally preferred coursework** as an assessment method.
- Many respondents shared that they **like receiving clear feedback**, including simple grades and scores.
- Some respondents felt **exams could feel like positive forms of assessments** where they have to use skills like critical thinking and analysis, or had to take data and understand how to apply it to different settings.

"I like how we have test papers and questions. I like how we have time limits and that we can do it individually." (KS2)

"I like how we are given positive and negative feedback." (KS3)

"I like coursework ... it's great to be able to choose something I'm really interested in and go in depth about it." (KS5)

- Many respondents shared that the heavy reliance on **exams has created anxiety and overwhelming stress**, sometimes leading to underperformance and burnout. Some respondents shared how as a neurodiverse or disabled student they felt their requirements for assessments were *"ignored"* or they had to *"fight to get access arrangements"*.
- Several KS5 students mentioned how their level of stress related to exams was **worse during GCSE's** compared to their current level of study.
- Many respondents, across all key stages, felt that they are just being **tested for memorisation skills**, which some feel leads to teaching focusing on memorisation. Respondents expressed how this does not fairly assess what they have learnt, the skills they have developed, or support young people to understand the 'why'.

"We shouldn't have to prove what we know in a set time limit. Sometimes we do not finish and can't actually show what we know." (KS2)

"Most of our papers are based off memorisation and I don't think that's fair because there is so much to remember." (KS3)

"The amount of pressure placed on some memory tests [...] is ridiculous... Students having panic attacks because of tests is not normal." (KS4)

FINDINGS: RELEVANCE TO LIFE

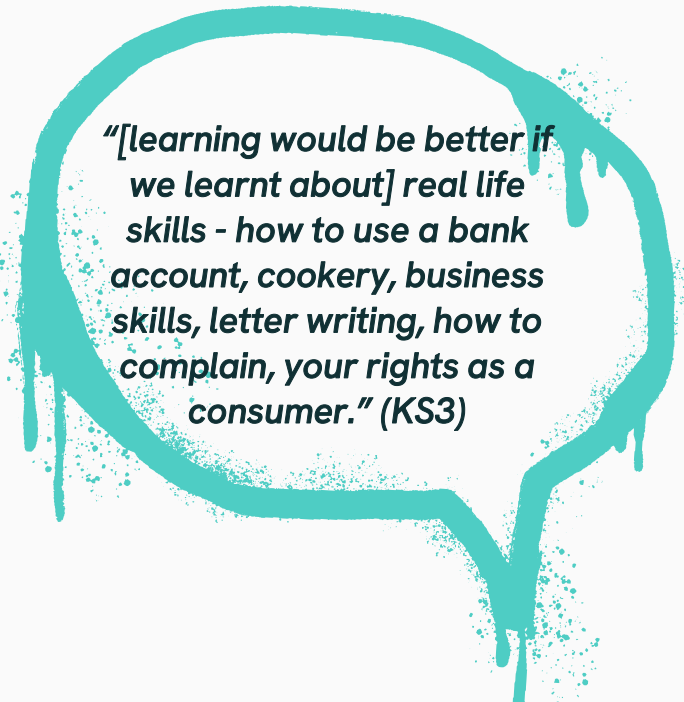
04

Learning should be more relevant to life

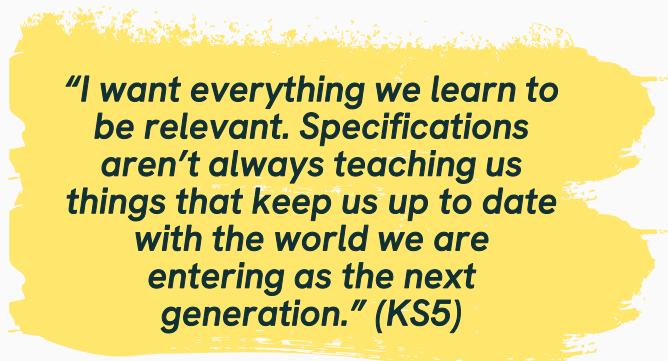
Respondents feel that their **learning is not preparing them for their futures**, with several sharing that they feel like they are not learning *“useful skills”* that can be *“used in real life”* and are less likely to enjoy subjects or topics that do not feel relevant to life. Older students, KS4 and KS5, were more likely to mention this in relation to future studies or careers, and how they feel unprepared for the workforce. Respondents shared that they wish to develop life skills and citizenship skills such as critical thinking, teamwork and respect.

Respondents from KS3-KS5 shared that they wanted to learn more about finances. For some, this came from a concern about financial struggles and wanting to know how to *“manage money”*.

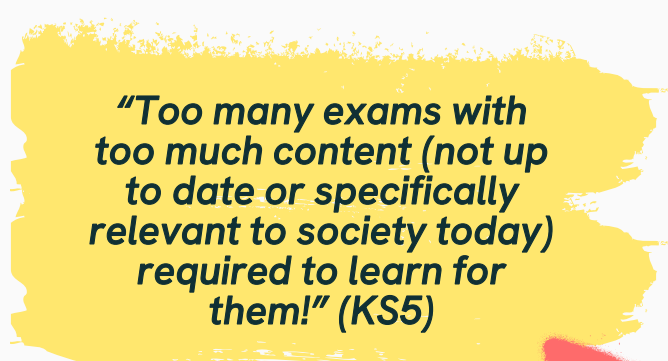
Several respondents also shared that they felt curriculum content and the resources, texts and textbooks used are *“outdated”* and sometimes factually incorrect.




“[learning would be better if we learnt about] real life skills - how to use a bank account, cookery, business skills, letter writing, how to complain, your rights as a consumer.” (KS3)



“I want everything we learn to be relevant. Specifications aren't always teaching us things that keep us up to date with the world we are entering as the next generation.” (KS5)



“Too many exams with too much content (not up to date or specifically relevant to society today) required to learn for them!” (KS5)



FINDINGS: INCLUSION

05

Learning should be more inclusive

Respondents, particularly those in KS3 to KS5, shared that they want to understand what is happening in society (locally, nationally, internationally), and why. KS2 students mentioned that they enjoy *“helping the community”*, whilst other respondents want to be *“changemakers”* and a part of improving society, but feel that the education system does not prepare them for this.

“We could learn about politics and promoting diversity more.” (KS4)

Whilst not all respondents enjoy learning about politics, several respondents from KS3-KS5 shared that they enjoy it and believe there should be greater inclusion of it in the curriculum. One group of KS3 students shared how they want to learn how *“we can make change (e.g. we should be taught our rights surrounding activism and protest).”*

“politics [is] a vital part of our society and the amount of school children who know nothing about politics is concerning. The most recent election had a 60% turnout rate... it's unlikely to change if people are not educated in the way it works.” (KS5)

Several respondents from KS3 to KS5 shared that they enjoy learning more about different cultures and want more diverse perspectives and voices in the curriculum, across subjects.

Some respondents want to learn more about diversity and representation, including religion and *“exposure to diverse cultures, ethnicities, gender identities, and sexual orientations.”* (KS4)

Some respondents believe there should be greater inclusion of *“non-western”* perspectives and solutions. History, English, and teaching on climate change were specifically mentioned in this context.

“I don't enjoy learning from a one-sided perspective... History lessons are often ethnocentric to British glory and European history.” (KS5)

Several respondents shared their experience as a neurodiverse or SEND student, feeling that their learning and access needs are often not supported or met; they would like better support in education.

FINDINGS: CLIMATE AND NATURE

06

Climate, environment and nature education is lacking

Many respondents, from KS2-KS5, reported education around climate change, environment and/or nature to be “missing”, “ignored” or taught in an “unengaging way”. Several respondents, across key stages, commented that learning about climate change is “important” in life, that they want to know more and that it is “link[ed] with every other subject”. Yet, some respondents shared that when they had been taught about climate change, it is focused on “western perspectives”, and that they believe their teachers feel they can’t speak more about it as it’s seen as too “political”.

KS3-KS5 respondents also shared how they experience “eco-anxiety” and want more time to interact with nature, support with eco-anxiety at school, and to be prepared for “better climate resilience”.



Drawing of a school, fox and tree by a KS2 student

“things that affect my future are missing from my learning, such as climate change” (KS3)

“I think that we could get more involved in the environment and what is happening with climate change” (KS2)

“I often lead discussions [in our school environment club] with the younger kids. I've seen my own fear and anxiety about the climate crisis mirrored in every one of them, and it breaks my heart to know that they too stay up at night because they're so scared about the future.” (KS4)

Respondents, from KS1-KS5, asked to spend more time at school in nature or outdoors to help reduce their stress levels, especially stress related to exams and climate change. Several shared enjoying learning more about nature, the natural environment, and how humans interact with it.

FINDINGS: PRACTICAL LEARNING

07

Learning should be more interactive and practical

"I enjoy being challenged by my peers and this helps me to gain an alternative angle on a topic I struggle with. I would like to see more opportunities for students to get involved in the classroom." (KS5)

Several respondents feel that classroom activities present a barrier to engaging in their learning. Respondents typically find discussion, interaction, and student-teacher collaboration the most effective and enjoyable ways to learn and revise, but say that most of their classroom time consists of "staring at a screen" and "simply reading off a slide".

Some respondents asked for the theory heavy curriculum to be redesigned to include more practical elements, giving students the chance to learn through doing as well as developing hands-on skills, teamwork, problem solving, and creativity.

"[I don't like lessons] when there is little engagement, simply reading off of a slide." (KS5)

"[We prefer] learning in more interactive ways like in food tech and art." (KS3)

"[Assessment could be improved by including] more variety in assessments, perhaps with oral exams, presentations, and group projects, as this is more like how you work in the workplace." (KS5)

Many respondents, across key stages, mentioned that they enjoy practical, creative and interactive learning and that learning would be better and "more fun" in these ways. Some respondents feel this way of learning helps reduce stress by allowing movement and more freedom, whilst some feel this gives them more "real life" skills to prepare them for adult life.

Some older respondents recognised that teachers need support and training for this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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What might change look like?

We have written the following recommendations after reviewing all the responses to our call for evidence and hope these will be considered in the government Curriculum and Assessment Review.

Assessments should have less reliance on memorising for exams

- Exams have a place but there needs to be fewer of them, with less weighting, and they should be spread throughout the academic year to reduce overwhelming pressure.
- Assessment should foster the skills that we actually want young people to be developing. For example, critical thinking, how to apply knowledge in different situations, understanding complexity, and working in teams are all better developed through coursework than exams.
- Incorporate more coursework and project-based assessments to reduce exam-related stress, particularly for KS4 students, and ensure stronger learning outcomes, especially for maths and science, which tend to be assessed through exams.
- The introduction to project-based learning earlier on in students' educational journey would better prepare them to carry out coursework at higher levels of education.

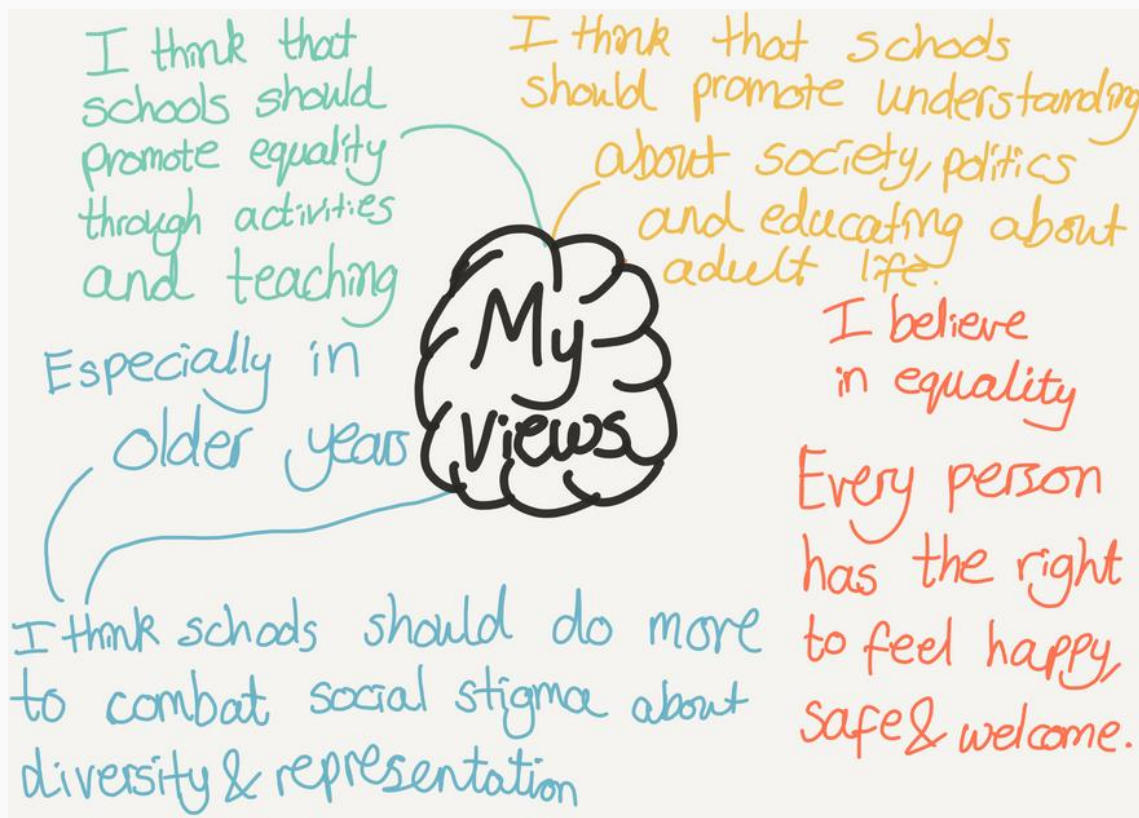
Learning should be more relevant to life

- Integrate citizenship skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, resilience, analytical skills, empathy, debate, and problem-solving into the curriculum.
- Introduce more financial literacy and content that better prepares young people for life and their futures.

"We should explore each subject in relation to the ways in which it can be practically applied to real life to bring about change in some of the most important issues facing society." (KS5)

Learning should be more inclusive

- The curriculum, across all subjects, needs to better reflect the diversity of our communities. This should include better addressing Britain's colonial history and, throughout its content, be more inclusive and representative of society across racial, religious, gender, disability, and sexual identities.
- Introduce political education into the curriculum to enable young people to politically participate in society through grassroots movements, protest, trade unions, voting, and community building.
- Support the development of strong students' unions in every college to support citizenship and enable young people to experience democratic education.
- Introduce curriculum content on mental health, SEND, and neurodiversity, as well as dedicated staff to support related student needs.



Notes on 'my views' submitted by a KS4 student

"More diversity and representation in curriculum across the board but especially at GCSE level." (KS4)

"Young people deserve high quality mental health education and support and the curriculum is currently falling short of this." (KS4)

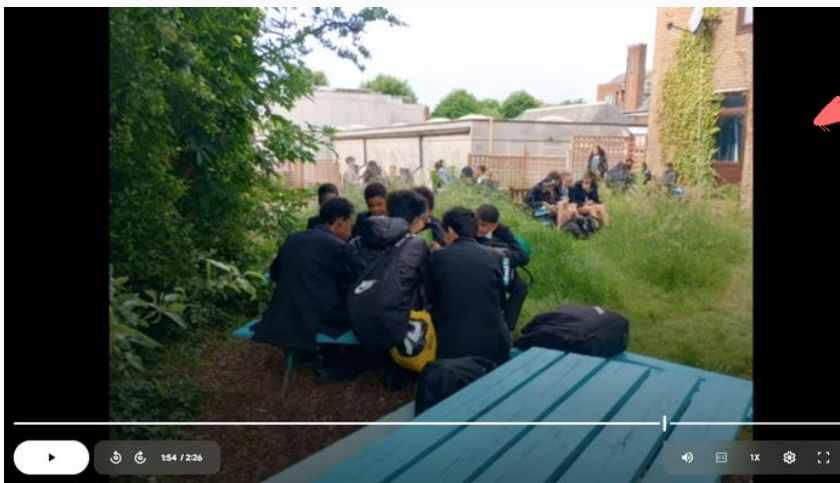
"[...] make it more accessible for students with conditions such as ADHD, OCD." (KS3)

"As an autistic person, I think we need to focus on better educating students on differences from an earlier age." (KS5)

Climate and nature education should be integrated across the curriculum

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- Integrate climate change and sustainability across all subjects, in a solutions-centred way. This could be done, at a minimum, by looking at existing content through a climate lens.
- Ensure that text books and exams stay up-to-date with climate science.
- Support teachers to use climate change as a meta-topic to facilitate more interdisciplinary project-based learning, to break down subject silos.
- Facilitate more learning about, and connection with, nature.



video submitted by KS3 and KS4 students who shared the *“natural world should be incorporated into lessons”* and believe *“we need an education...[about] how we can make change.”*

Learning should be more interactive and practical

- Provide support, training and CPD for teachers to help learning to be more fun, practical and interactive through different learning methods.
- Expand opportunities for students to engage in real-world problem-solving through interdisciplinary, project-based learning. This type of exploratory learning facilitates the development of key competencies in learners, including critical thinking, collaboration, self-awareness and others, and offers an alternative to memorisation-based learning and exams as a means of assessing skills and understanding.
- Include arts subjects as compulsory subjects in the national curriculum post 14 to ensure young people have access to these subjects wherever they study.
- More teaching and learning should take place outdoors to foster nature connectedness and to improve student (and teacher) wellbeing.

“The school curriculum is very set for academic subjects and the creative and practical subjects feel like they are not valued, which makes you feel you are not as valued if you are not academic.” (KS4)

CONCLUSION

This interim report was prepared by the youth shadow panel, with support from the [eleven partner organisations](#) of the Shadow curriculum and assessment review. It represents the voice of young people aged 5-19 across the English education system, **calling for an education that is more relevant, inclusive, practical, and supportive of young people's mental health and wellbeing.** The findings from our call for evidence, which we have outlined in this report, highlight a need for less exam-based pressure, greater real-world application, and an education system that fosters inclusivity, creativity, and skills and values which support young people to be positive change makers to tackle societal challenges such as climate change.

The Shadow curriculum and assessment review will **continue to amplify youth perspectives** in the coming months through **regional roadshows and expert roundtables** focused on the key themes in this report. A final report, set to be published in early summer 2025, will provide further insights and concrete recommendations.



We hope that the official Curriculum and Assessment Review Panel will **take these recommendations forward** and engage meaningfully with young people to shape the future of education. We are grateful for [our collaboration with the official Review Panel so far](#), and look forward to continued constructive dialogue with the government and other stakeholders.

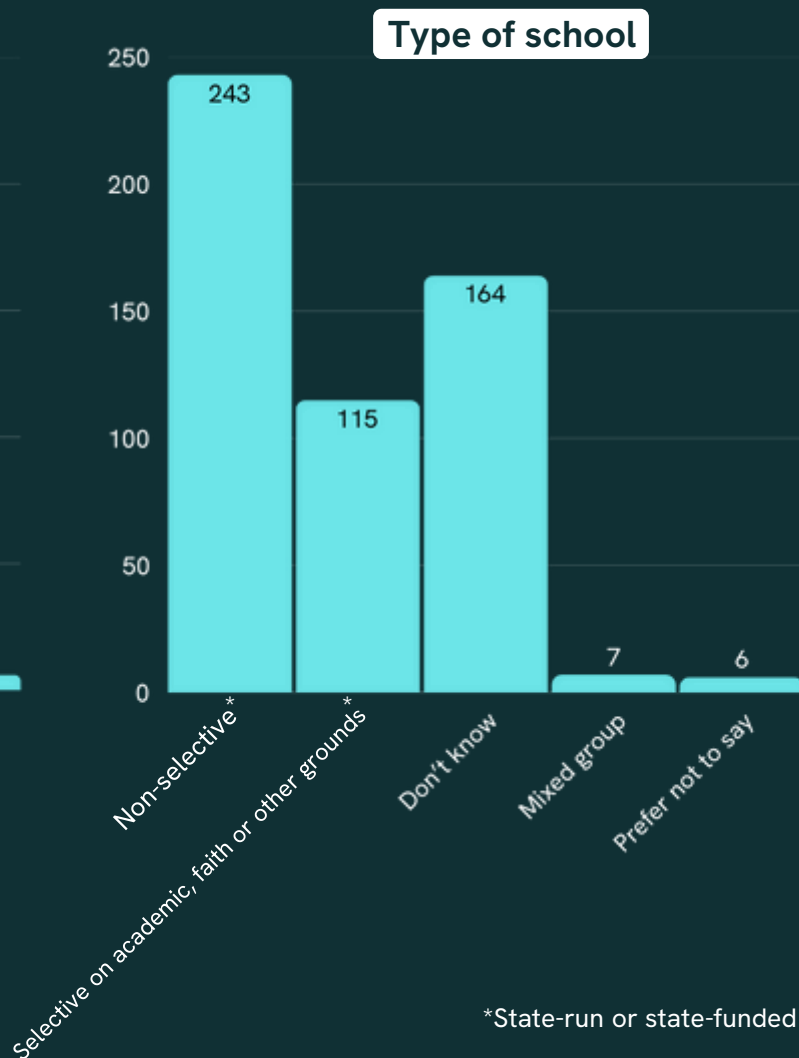
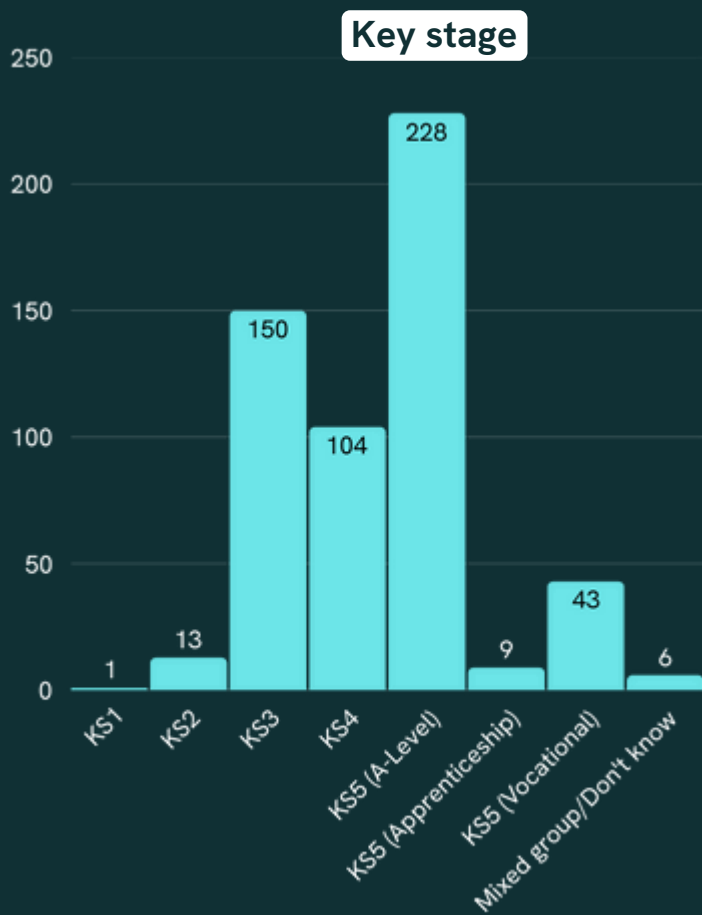
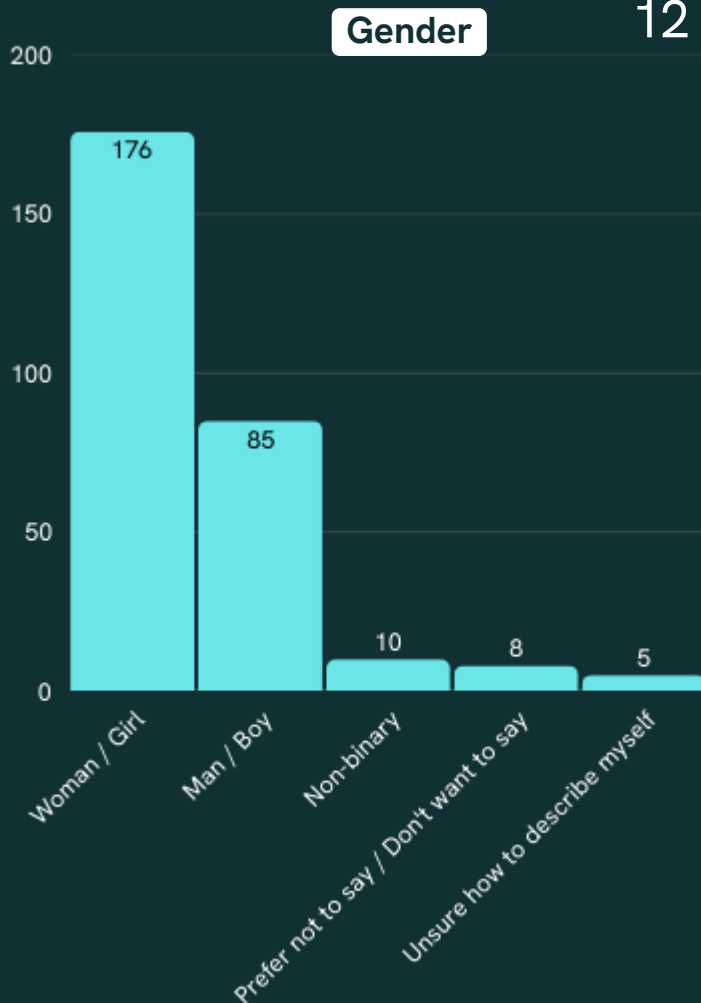
Organisations and institutions can show support for the Shadow review and receive updates by endorsing us at www.shadowpanel.uk/about/endorsements



RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

556 responses were reviewed manually for the creation of this report. Responses in our call for evidence from young people from private schools and outside of England were not included as they are outside of scope for the national curriculum.

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*State-run or state-funded

Stay in touch



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Prepared by the
YOUTH SHADOW PANEL

With thanks to our funders:

