

Discussion Paper 3

Bringing it all Back Home

Reviving and Unifying the Family Learning and Parental Engagement Agendas

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Preface

The aim of the Campaign for Learning's Discussion Paper series is to generate debate over an urgent issue in education, skills and employability policy.

Discussion Paper 3 examines how family learning and parental engagement in education in England can be revived and developed into a unified strategy. In the aftermath of Covid-19, and amidst the current economic pressures, it's timely to focus on the potential role of family learning and parental engagement policy in supporting children's learning catch-up, family wellbeing and adults' skills to build the economy.

The Campaign for Learning is extremely grateful to Sam Freedman, senior fellow at the Institute for Government, for preparing the discussion paper and adding his voice to reviving and unifying the family learning and parental engagement agendas.

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Summary

(i) Parental engagement and family learning are concepts that have been present in the education world for decades. How parents support their children to learn, and how the state can help them do so, have been understood to be critical to attainment for a long time. Yet in recent years, while still of interest to schools and researchers, they have faded from national policy discussion, at least in England. There are a number of reasons for this. The coalition and Conservative governments have focused on structural reform, as well as assessment and curriculum. They have not taken the broader approach to children and families adopted by previous administrations, particularly the last Labour government.

(ii) But schools are not islands and, as much as this government may have wanted to focus purely on teaching, the role of families in children's lives and education cannot be ignored. The pandemic brought this into sharp focus, with two lengthy periods where most pupils were not in school, which had a serious effect on learning, particularly in maths, and perhaps an even more serious impact on mental health and wellbeing.

(iii) Even before the pandemic hit, the government were starting, gradually, to pay more attention to family policy again. The schools white paper published this spring offered a parents' pledge, the first significant mention of parents in a policy document for some time. The new "Multiply" adult numeracy scheme has a strand around family learning. There has been some investment in family hubs, which have many similarities to the Sure Start programme. Of course we will need to see whether the Truss government pursues any of these policies with greater or lesser interest. But there are now at least some foundations for considering how a unifying agenda around the theme of family learning and parental engagement could be revived.

The Paper

(iv) The first section of this discussion paper sketches the history of policy development in family learning and parental engagement in England and, post-2010, in Scotland and Wales, as their systems have diverged. It shows how the agenda emerged in earnest during the 80s and 90s, before the Labour government made it an important plank of their "children and families" policy, with this continuing in Wales and Scotland even as the Westminster government took England in a different direction.

(v) The second section looks at the current government's policy agenda for England, showing the areas in which families policy is re-emerging and the forms in which it is doing so.

(vi) The third section considers how family learning and parental engagement can be unified within a single policy approach in England. The final section offers a series of recommendations for how these different strands can be strengthened and brought together, into a clearer and more coherent statement.

Definitions

(vii) A note on definitions. I am using "parental engagement" to refer to all the available activities governments can support and promote, that help parents to assist their children's education and development. This can include intensive or low-level parenting support; guidance; provision of information from educational settings to parents; and other assistance.

(viii) I am using "family learning" as a sub-set of "parental engagement" to mean programmes specifically designed to enable parents to learn alongside their children to the benefit of both. The aim of a family learning programme includes improving adult skills as well as helping parents to support their children better.

Devolution

(ix) While I look briefly at policy in Scotland and Wales, the focus of the paper and the recommendations are around policy in England. I do not cover family learning and parental engagement policies in Northern Ireland.

A Historical Review

England

Pre-1997

1 The importance of families in improving learning has been understood for a very long time. Over 90 years ago, the Hadow Report on primary schools recommended that schools send a report to parents so as to “stimulate interest in their children’s progress”, and that local authorities provide information about the range of secondary options available.¹

2 In 1967, 55 years ago, the Plowden report on primary education had a whole chapter on “participation by parents” and offered a long series of recommendations for schools including: open days; induction sessions with parents; parents evenings and home visits. The report authors were clear that “one of the essentials for educational advance is a close partnership between [schools and parents] for every child’s education.”²

3 At that time, though, central government played little role in the direct provision of schooling. During the 1980s this started to change, and the 1986 Education Act began to formalise parents’ role in the system by creating a duty for schools to have parent governors and a requirement that governors present an annual report to parents. The 1980 Education Act had created the basic school choice infrastructure we have today, which required parents to take more active decisions about their children’s education.

4 The introduction of a national curriculum, a new national inspectorate in the form of Ofsted, and Key Stage tests in the late 1980s and early 1990s created a standardised set of national tools that parents could engage with. But that increasingly led schools, local authorities, and government to appreciate how big the gaps around parental engagement were. The importance of working with parents is a regular feature of early Ofsted reviews.

5 During the course of the 1990s, more local authorities started to develop formalised interventions for parent support, rather than just relying on schools. This was heavily influenced by emerging best practice from the United States. A good example is the INSPIRE programme that ran as part of the Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership starting in 1995. This was one of the first large scale UK programmes designed to engage parents directly in curriculum learning with their children and ran across 400 schools, involving 100,000 parents by 2003.³ Unfortunately, as was too often standard at the time in the UK, and indeed still is, there was no proper evaluation.

6 Alongside local authority driven programmes such as this, there was a national programme called SHARE that began in 1997 and ran into the 2000s. This was designed to give over 1000 schools across the country training, materials and support, but unfortunately there is very little information available on the programme design and again the evaluation did not look at the impact on pupil attainment or on parents' employment prospects.⁴

7 We also saw, in 1993 the first national attempt at a family literary programme, designed to improve both children's attainment and adults' employability. This was established by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, a quasi-independent government agency. It ran well into the 2000s, ultimately spinning out into multiple other programmes that were funded by the Learning and Skills Council. It was an intensive programme of eight hours a week for 12 weeks. An NFER evaluation of the pilot found positive benefits for pupils and parents but it was not a controlled trial so is, again, of limited value.⁵

1997 to 2010: New Labour and national strategy around parental engagement and family learning

8 Nevertheless, the growing popularity and extent of these programmes led to the incorporation of parental engagement and family learning as a theme within national policy. The Labour Government's first white paper in 1997 had a section on parental support and made the argument in the strongest terms yet seen in central government policy document:

"Family learning is a powerful tool for reaching some of the most disadvantaged in our society. It has the potential to reinforce the role of the family and change attitudes to education, helping build strong local communities and widening participation in learning."

9 The 1997 white paper promised to expand locally successful schemes, as well as the Family Literacy Initiative, with funding rolled out to local authorities to run their own programmes. It also specified additional information that schools would have to provide to parents and introduced "home/school contracts", which were not legally binding but required schools to set out what they would offer parents and the behaviours and support they expected in return.⁶

10 This approach reached its zenith with the Every Child Matters green paper in 2003 and the Children's Plan in 2007. These documents aimed for a fully integrated system for children, with local authorities having a single strategy incorporating education, social care and the broader childhood agenda. The name change from the Department of Education and Skills to the Department for Children, Schools, and Families in 2007 was symbolic of the intended shift in behaviours and prioritisation.

11 The Every Child Matters paper proposed a mix of universal parenting support – via a national helpline; light touch family learning programmes; and better information flow from schools – and a targeted offer of more intensive parent support programmes; home visits; and counselling support. The expectation was that this would continue to be delivered via local authorities working with specialist providers; but more consistently across the country.⁷

12 This was built on in the Children's Plan with funding for local authority expert parenting advisers who were supposed to support a network of school-based Parent Support Advisers. There was also a long list of new duties for schools, such as requiring every child to have a personal tutor who would act as a main contact for parents, and more regular provision of information about children's attendance and learning. And there was also £30m to further expand the family learning programmes that had grown out of the original Basic Skills Unit pilot.⁸

13 By 2010 there was, therefore, a large network of Parent Support Advisers working in over 1000 schools and supported by local authorities, as well as a range of family learning programmes going on around the country. The initial evaluation of Parent Support Advisers' effectiveness in 2009 found a higher reduction in persistent absenteeism in schools included in the pilot (though it wasn't randomised).⁹ There was also a network of 3500 Sure Start children's centres which provided broader parenting support and advice particularly, but not exclusively, for pre-school children.

2010 to 2022: A Change in focus from the Coalition Government Onwards

14 The arrival of the coalition government in May 2010 radically changed the picture in England. The Department immediately became the Department for Education (DfE) again, and this reflected the change in priorities. The new ministerial team took the view that the attempts to broaden schools' role into the wider children's services agenda had detracted from their core purpose of education. And many schools had, indeed, become frustrated by the additional bureaucratic constraints and central proscription of the "Every Child Matters" era.

15 In July 2010, the Academies Act was introduced, which allowed good and outstanding schools to leave their local authority. The majority of secondary schools did so within five years, with 80% having converted by 2022; 40% of primary schools have also now converted. At the same time, central funding for local authorities was slashed as part of broader austerity measures, and non-statutory expectations on local authorities' children's services were largely removed. The Children's Plan was scrapped in its entirety.

16 This doesn't mean all the services that existed for parents have disappeared. Plenty of schools still have parent support advisers, or some kind of family support liaison. There are still initiatives providing family learning or parental engagement assistance supported by local authorities or voluntary organisations. For example, Save the Children ran the "Families and Schools Together" (FAST) programme between 2010 and 2018 and now run a programme called Families Connect. FAST was evaluated by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in 2018, which did not find any evidence of impact on children's attainment.¹⁰ There are a number of other programmes such as "Triple P" (Positive Parenting Programme) supported by Leeds-based charity SHINE, which have yet to be fully evaluated. Many local authorities still run their own family learning programmes.

17 But there is no national orchestration to any of this. There is no central government policy around parenting support or family learning and no expectations on local authorities or schools. Nor is there any funding. This means that provision is patchy and hard to track or evaluate, beyond those programmes that have been selected for EEF trials. In a 2019 survey for the EEF fewer than half of schools (in a sample of 250) said they had an individual member of staff with overall responsibility for parental engagement, or had policies and procedures specifically aimed at engaging parents from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.¹¹ All schools in England have to help them is a guidance report from the EEF based on a review of existing evidence and whatever support their local authority or academy trust chooses to provide from within their general budget.¹²

18 Similarly, there are still children’s centres supported by local authorities, but 1,300 fewer in 2019 than 2010 and, again, patchily distributed. Some authorities have the same number they did a decade ago, but others have significantly reduced services in order to prioritise other budgets. Gateshead, for instance, now only has one centre, down from 15 in 2010.¹³ And, again, there’s no national coordination of these centres or central support, expectations, training or evaluation, so it’s hard to tell what they’re offering or whether it is adding value.

19 The pandemic offered a golden opportunity to re-engage with this agenda at a national level. For two lengthy periods in 2020 and 2021, most young people were being schooled at home with parents and teachers having to collaborate. This could have been built on as part of a post-pandemic parental engagement strategy, but there is little sign of this happening either at the national level or within schools, who are mostly overwhelmed with the additional staffing, wellbeing, and financial challenges of managing with minimal central support.

Scotland

20 Education is a devolved function and Scotland and Wales have chosen a markedly different path to England since 2010, albeit while still dealing with falling budgets. Scotland has essentially continued with what England was doing back then, making parental engagement and family learning a core part of their national improvement strategy, and tasking local government with delivering a mix of family learning programmes, targeted support, and universal school engagement with parents.¹⁴

21 Specific policies set out in the Scottish Government’s “Learning together: national action plan on parental involvement, engagement, family learning and learning at home 2018 – 2021” include: rolling out a network of home-school link workers (who have a similar function to that which Parent Support Advisers used to have in England); light touch offers like the online “Parent Club”¹⁵ and “Read, Write, Count” bags¹⁶; and more intensive programmes like Families First, which provides key worker support for more vulnerable families.¹⁷ All of this is essentially what the Children’s Plan promised for England in 2007. It’s illustrative that Save the Children’s Families Connect programme, originally designed in England, is now part of the Scottish strategy but does not appear in any DfE documentation.

22 The main future challenge for Scotland is evaluating these individual programmes and the collective benefit of the whole package to show whether it is really adding value. They produced a research review in 2016 but as with earlier reviews in England, there is very limited evidence on the impact of family learning from the UK.¹⁸ There are plans for evaluation and there is also now a biennial “Parental Involvement and Engagement Census” to provide data to inform future strategy.¹⁹

Wales

23 The Welsh parental engagement strategy is less detailed and developed, but broadly similar. Again, there is funding directed to local authorities to provide family learning programmes; and for schools to hire Family Engagement Officers to tackle inequality and absence issues.²⁰ They also recently announced a trial of Community Managers based in schools to link up with other agencies to support pupils and the wider community; though there is limited detail as yet as to how this will work in practice.²¹

A Review of Current Policy in England

Schools policy and parental engagement

24 Re-establishing a national strategy for parental engagement and family learning in England would not be straightforward. Going back to the situation as it was in 2010, or as it is now in Scotland, would not be viable. A large proportion of schools have disconnected from local government, and the recent schools white paper set out plans for them all to be part of academy trusts by 2030. Local authorities have significantly reduced capacity. Even if funding were to be ramped up, they no longer have the knowledge or experience to re-create old networks and programmes. Nor do they have the necessary relationships with schools.

25 We also don't have any evidence base that shows the old strategy, or what Scotland and Wales are doing now, works. This is largely due to a lack of proper evaluation rather than any negative results, but it weakens the case for going back. What we do know is that there is a large amount of evidence for the importance of parental engagement on pupils' attainment in general. It's much less clear how we unlock the potential of greater engagement in practice, whether through family learning or other interventions. But given the potential impact of doing so it cannot be ignored - especially given the interactions with other critical issues like mental health, children's social care, and pre-school education.

26 There are signs that the current government, or at least the ministerial team that was in place before July, does want to re-engage with this agenda and identify new approaches. In the recent white paper, a new "Parent Pledge" was set out. It is described as:

"A promise from government, via schools, to families: any child that falls behind in English or maths should receive timely and evidence-based support to enable them to reach their potential. We pledge to make that a reality in every school in the country. We pledge to ensure that schools communicate this work to parents, ensuring parents are fully engaged in their child's education – and relieving them of the worry and stress that comes from a child falling behind at school."²²

27 This is the first time since 2010 that parents have been acknowledged in these terms in a major government policy document. But the pledge itself is underwhelming as there is no mechanism either to ensure schools are delivering this catch-up support or that they are communicating with parents about it. Nevertheless, there is an opening here to expand the Parent Pledge into something meaningful, and help schools meet it, by providing guidance and support.

28 Local authorities are unlikely to be the best vehicles for this anymore. The multi-academy trust is the main intermediary now between central government and individual schools. At present, there are no expectations on trusts around parental engagement. Indeed, there are no clear educational expectations at all, as trusts are only regulated on their finances and governance. However, the initial version of the Schools Bill, currently working its way through Parliament, contained a new mechanism for setting standards for trusts including on “the nature and quality of education provided” and “collaboration between proprietors of Academies and any other persons”.²³ This clause was pulled after concern in the House of Lords that it would give central government too much power, but we are expecting more focused clauses to be introduced after conference season, assuming the Bill goes ahead.

29 If the DfE does take more interest in providing overarching expectations for academy trusts, either through this legislation or another mechanism, it would be a good opportunity to make parental engagement a clear expectation of trusts, and to set out, at a high level, what that should look like. This could, for instance, be an expectation that trusts will have a parental engagement strategy and provide information about their offer to all parents with children attending academies in the trust.

30 A new expectation on trusts to have a strategy – as there used to be for local authorities – could then provide the basis for support and guidance, potentially using the Parent Pledge as a banner, similarly to the way the Scottish Government use “Parent Club”. This would also have the advantage of encouraging a wide range of different approaches from trusts, that could then be properly evaluated, to help us understand the most effective methods.

31 It is highly unlikely that the DfE would offer any kind of ringfenced funding for this as they have largely, and sensibly, moved away from providing lots of hypothecated pots of money for specific policies. Nor do they have spare resources for centrally funded programmes under current spending review conditions, while the state of public finances means there won't be any additional money in the near future. They could though, at a minimum, produce guidance for trusts which set out best practice, the evidence base - as per the EEF review - and provides information about existing programmes and suppliers. If some central resources could be found, from within existing budgets, these could be used to support a network of expert advisers on parental support and engagement to work with trusts who wanted help developing their strategy.

Early years policy, family support, and parental engagement

32 There is now very limited central delivery infrastructure around early years and family support. The national Sure Start system has been dismantled, leaving us with a patchy network of children's centres depending on whether local authorities have continued to fund them. Many of the family learning programmes that are still operating at local level do so via these remaining children's centres.

33 However, at the spending review, £302m was announced to support 75 local authorities to develop "Family Hubs". These are effectively a remodeled version of Sure Start under a different name with significantly less funding attached and less central coordination. There is little detail at the moment about programme requirements or expectations, but it does seem that £50m of the funding is supposed to be spent on "evidence-based parenting programmes". Once the programme requirements are published, assuming the new administration continues the policy, we will have a better sense of what this will look like and whether it offers an opportunity for central coordination, scale and evaluation.²⁴

34 This is a one-off funding grant, but there is an ambition within the DfE for the family hub model to subsume the children centre one and become the norm in all local authorities over time. There is, therefore, a clear opportunity to use the policy as a vehicle for co-ordinating parenting support at a national level, even if this does not happen in the initial phase.

35 We have also had the recent publication of a report from the Children’s Commissioner, Rachel de Souza, on families. The first paper is an analysis of the challenges faced by families at the moment, but it promises a focus in part two on the integration of family services, as lack of consistent access and a clear offer is a prominent theme of the analysis. As the report says: “this stems from a failure to assign clear responsibility for co-ordinating the family offer at a local level, meaning families often fall between the gaps.”²⁵

Adult skills policy and family learning

36 An expectation on trusts to support parental engagement, combined with national guidance and support would re-create a basic infrastructure for the policy agenda. But given financial constraints, it would be unlikely to lead to the development of large scale, intensive, family learning interventions. In the 1990s it was the Basic Skills Agency that developed and funded national programmes, but there is no longer this kind of national coordination in adults skills funding – and there is far less of it now than there was then.

37 Much of what is left is devolved, so it’s up to Mayoral Combined Authorities and other local government structures to decide how to invest the money. There are around 40% of areas where commissioning is still done centrally. This system can lead to an unhelpful lack of clarity. For instance there has been a recent proposal, in a DfE consultation, to focus the objectives of adult skills funding for non-formal qualifications on courses that will help labour market access. There is significant confusion about this proposal as it is not clear if it would apply just to areas that still have central commissioning or also areas where funding is devolved. And real concern that the focus on the labour market may make it harder for providers to offer family learning programmes. It is important that any changes do not risk existing programmes.

38 However, there is one national programme that was launched at the spending review last year: Multiply. This is a £559m investment in numeracy courses for adults who do not have a grade C/4 equivalent in GCSE maths. The initial “prospectus” to mayoral combined and unitary authorities, asking for their proposals, sets out a range of programmes that could be allowed under the overall “Multiply” branding. This includes:

“Courses for parents wanting to increase their numeracy skills in order to help their children, and help with their own progression. We know the evidence suggests that improving the education qualifications of a parent can also positively impact of the attainment of their child; as well as accrue benefits to the parent themselves. That’s why, where local areas can demonstrate the impact, we are interested in family numeracy programmes, such as those delivered in schools or through numeracy toolkits.”²⁶

39 The prospectus also encourages partnership working across areas of local government. There is an opportunity here, then, for combined and unitary authorities to work together to offer a standardised family learning programme. The key advantage of doing so would be a programme that had enough scale to be properly evaluated in terms of both attainment for pupils and improvements in adult skills and employability. If the programme is seen as a success, there may also be scope for something similar in the literacy space.

40 There is another potential funding route via the 55 Education Investment Areas that were established as part of the “levelling up” white paper in areas that are considered to be underperforming educationally.²⁷ At the moment there is little being done with these “EIAs” – it’s unclear what their purpose is beyond the appearance of action. All they are getting is a small amount of funding for teacher retention bonuses and prioritisation for new selective 16-19 colleges (which are very unlikely to help level anything up – indeed, they will likely increase inequality in these areas). Pressure may grow on the government to show more evidence that they are really investing in “levelling up” - especially given the change in administration - which may create the opportunity to propose new targeted programmes for these areas.

Assessment

41 Overall the picture is of a slow reassertion of national level infrastructure following the dismantling of the Every Child Matters model. We will have increasingly large academy trusts who will now be regulated against expected standards by the DfE. We will have at least one national adult skills programme. And we will have a network of family hubs. At this stage, the focus should be on establishing parent engagement and family support within these different strands. Longer term, there is a question as to how to integrate these three different strands of policy into a coherent whole.

Unifying Family Learning and Parental Engagement Policy in England

42 One of the biggest challenges for the new ministerial team at the DfE is how to bring together various different streams of work around children's health, care, and wellbeing. They have been left with a lot of loose ends. We have a SEND green paper, currently out for consultation, that would lead to a new national infrastructure for allocating support for special needs and disability, but would also reduce parental choice.²⁸ We have a report from Josh MacAlister on restructuring the increasingly unsustainable children's social care system, that is currently under consideration.²⁹ We have the Children's Commissioner's report on families. The Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is under extreme pressure, and barely functional in parts of the country.

43 On top of this, as we have seen, they have to navigate the Schools Bill, with a new approach to trust regulation, which may give an opportunity to consider the wider role of academy trusts in the system. And they have to manage the roll out of family hubs. And the new Multiply programme. Given limited time and resources it would make sense for ministers to bring all this together into a new approach to supporting children and families. It wouldn't, and couldn't, look like Every Child Matters. The infrastructure isn't there to do it, nor is the financial position of either local authorities or central government anywhere near as healthy as it was in the 2000s.

44 But there is an opportunity to forge something different that integrates these varied elements into a coherent approach. Outlining in detail what this might look like is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it could involve setting out the strategic role for larger academy trusts in the broader children's ecosystem, and what is still the responsibility of local authorities. It could discuss how family hubs and trusts will be expected to work together. There may even be scope to develop out the idea from the MacAlister review of Regional Care Co-Operatives, which would be groups of local authorities combining their spending and commissioning power together.

45 A new Children’s strategy could then include a chapter or section on family learning and parental engagement which could clarify who had overall responsibility for the policy. It would make sense for this to be local authorities given they are managing the roll-out of both family hubs and Multiply, as well as running pre-existing schemes that have remained in places since the 2000s. But critically there needs to be coherence around the way they work with local academy trusts, so that resources and programmes are shared and coordinated. There also needs to be some kind of overarching DfE oversight, if only to monitor, record and evaluate what is happening.

46 This is a great opportunity for a new administration, and a new ministerial team, to make its mark, without having to spend significant additional sums of money or undo the work of their predecessors. As this government have slowly realised, schools cannot be seen in isolation - they are part of the wider ecosystem that supports families and children. It’s time to take that realisation to its logical conclusion.

Recommendations

- 1.** The DfE should develop a single Children and Families Strategy that brings together policy on children’s social care; SEND; mental health; parental engagement and family learning. It should set out the relative roles and responsibilities of local authorities, other parts of local government, academy trusts, and central government.
- 2.** The Children and Families strategy should unify parental engagement and family learning policy in England.
- 3.** The DfE should develop the “Parent Pledge” set out in the white paper. This should involve an expectation on academy trusts to have a parents strategy; and should also offer a package of guidance and support to trusts based on the EEF evidence review and existing programmes.
- 4.** The DfE should invest a small amount of money to recruit parent support advisers to help trusts develop their strategies, within the Regions Directorate.
- 5.** The DfE should ensure that their current FE funding and accountability consultation does not reduce the availability of family learning programmes by forcing providers to focus on immediate labour market outcomes.
- 6.** The DfE should ensure that some family learning programmes are included within the mix of provision funded through the Multiply scheme. Mayoral Combined Authorities and Unitary Authorities should work together to develop programmes that have enough scale to be evaluated.
- 7.** The DfE should use the family hubs network to evaluate large scale parenting support and family learning programmes across multiple different hubs.

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Campaign for Learning Policy Pamphlets

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- No.3 Reforming Technical and Professional Education: Why should it work this time? February 2017, Mick Fletcher
- No.4 Mending the Gap: Are the needs of 16-18 year olds being met? January 2018, John Widdowson
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The Campaign for Learning works for social and economic inclusion through learning. In 2020, it became an independently managed organisation in the NCFE charity.

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