



Post-16 GCSE Resits Policy Analysis and Consultation

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December 2025



Background

GCSE Resit Policy Directions

The GCSE resit policy has been an ongoing source of controversy amongst educational policymakers and professionals since the introduction of the *Condition of Funding* in 2014. This policy means that all students who do not achieve a ‘standard pass’ of a Grade 4 in English and/or Maths must continue studying these subjects as part of their post-16 pathway. While a small proportion of students, particularly those with the lowest prior attainment may study Functional Skills if it is offered, the majority of those entering post-16 without a Grade 4 continue to GCSE resit programmes.

The numbers involved remain substantial. In 2024, 71.2% of 16-year-olds achieved a grade 4 or higher in English language, and 72% did so in maths. However, when including older students, the overall pass rates drop to 61.6% for English language and 59.6% for maths (FFT Education Datalab, 2024). Also concerning is the low proportion of resit students who go on to achieve a grade 4 or higher. In 2024, just 17.4% of post-16 students resitting GCSE maths gained a grade 4, while the figure for English was 20.9% (Camden, 2024).

The resit requirement has been controversial for a number of reasons. Some researchers, practitioners and students believe that the ‘forced’ nature of the resits is problematic, arguing that it can reinforce a sense of failure for young people and that students should have more choice over whether they continue with their maths and English studies beyond the age of 16 (see, for example, Bellamy, 2017; Ireland, 2019). Others, including some sector organisations, argue that there needs to be an overhaul of resourcing, curriculum, and assessment approaches in order to better support and engage students, and maximise their chances of success (Davies et al., 2020; Sezen, 2023; Vidal Rodeiro, 2019). The government and advocates for the policy suggest that improving the English and maths skills of post-16 learners is vital for addressing skills gaps in the labour market and provides increased opportunities for further study and skilled employment (DfE, 2021; Wolf, 2011).

The new Labour government, elected in 2024, have demonstrated significant interest in reviewing and reforming certain areas of the 16-19 education sector, including in relation to the qualifications available to students, the development of specialist Technical Excellence Colleges, post-16 curriculum and assessment, and the teacher workforce. There have already been some key decisions taken regarding the retention of certain Level 3 qualifications (such as BTECs) that were due to be cut by the previous government (Labour Party, 2024; Department for Education 2025; Education Committee, 2025; Lewis, 2025) and a reversal of plans to introduce a weekly minimum number of hours for GCSE resit teaching (Camden, 2024). Questions remain, however, about what might come next for the GCSE resits policy, and about how well current curriculum and assessment options provided for 16–19 learners in relation to support participation, accessibility, quality and progression.

With this in mind, we have drawn upon our work in the post-16 sector and our engagement with post-16 organisations, colleges, leaders, teachers, and young people to conduct a policy analysis and consultation. This activity was designed to provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the resits policy, its aims, and the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders involved with it. Crucially, we were interested in examining the alternative perspectives that exist in relation to GCSE resits. What are the key points of debate and consensus here? What are the issues, contexts and experiences that

influence these perspectives? Additionally, what policy developments might be fruitful when thinking about improving outcomes and opportunities for the young people engaged with the resit qualifications?

The policy analysis and consultation reported here were conducted during the period of the independent Curriculum and Assessment Review, chaired by Professor Becky Francis, and should be read in that context. While the Review was ongoing, a number of relevant proposals and lines of inquiry were already emerging, including questions about the role and status of GCSEs post-16, the balance between academic, vocational and functional pathways, and the extent to which curriculum and assessment arrangements support progression, inclusion and learner motivation. Our consultation was therefore not designed to respond to a settled policy position, but to inform and support ongoing decision-making, reform and implementation in this area. By capturing sector perspectives during a period of active review and policy development, the findings provide insight into how current arrangements are experienced on the ground, and into the considerations that may shape future approaches to post-16 GCSE resits as reforms are taken forward.

In the sections below, we outline our work, to date, relating to post-16 GCSE resits, and then move onto sharing the approaches used for this policy analysis study, followed by our presentation of the key ‘policy perspectives’ that we have identified. These findings and summaries, we suggest, could be valuable for informing and supporting reforms relating to GCSE resits policy and practice. We would also argue that the findings from this work – and our related studies – also connect with wider sector issues, such as tackling the teacher supply situation in Further Education, and supporting the expansion and development of a culture of research-informed practice.

Our work

Since 2023, we have been working within the post-16 sector and with our partners at the Association of Colleges (AoC) and the Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY) to raise awareness of some of the work happening around the area of GCSE resits. The first strand of our work was a practice review which provided a detailed insight into the, albeit limited, research landscape surrounding GCSE resits, and the approaches and interventions being used in post-16 settings across the country (see Crisp et al., 2023). The review also highlighted some of the significant challenges facing the sector and the barriers that can impede success for post-16 GCSE learners. This review led to the establishment of the [GCSE Resit Hub](#), a dedicated website collating key resources for practitioners and leaders, with evidence-informed approaches and research papers alongside a weekly blog from those connected to resits. The team developed a series of online ‘Spotlight’ sessions on topics suggested by the sector, including specific English and maths sessions, leadership and motivation, and student engagement. The final strand of the Resit Hub project is this policy analysis and consultation. The aim of this has been to gain a better understanding of the policy debates and the range of positions held relating to GCSE resits, in order to consider what might be the most fruitful and feasible ways forward for supporting learners’ outcomes. Our engagement with the policy-related issues here have enabled us to engage with a range of perspectives and identify where there is consensus or divergence in the views and experiences of those working across the sector. We hope that understanding and unravelling some of these often complex and strongly held standpoints will enable us, and others working in this field, to better pinpoint where meaningful action and development is required.

Policy Consultation Overview

Approach

The policy analysis and consultation work involved two key approaches:

- A **policy document review**, consisting of an in-depth analysis of contemporary policy and policy-related documents connected to GCSE resits
- A **consultation survey**, asking participants from across the post-16 sector to share their perspectives and experiences relating to GCSE resit policy

Together, these approaches were designed to build a clearer picture of how current policy is experienced on the ground, identify areas of concern or tension, and surface ideas for future development. The analysis focused on capturing both system-level drivers and the practical realities of delivery.

Policy document analysis

To identify relevant policy documents, we conducted in-depth searches of government websites (including the Department for Education and the former Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, now both incorporated into the Department for Education). We also reviewed the websites of sector bodies (such as the AoC), education research and policy organisations (e.g. the Education Policy Institute), training and skills-focused organisations (e.g. the Education and Training Foundation, Learning and Work Institute, The Edge Foundation), and subject associations (e.g. the English Association, Mathematics in Education and Industry).

Documents relating to post-16 GCSE English and/or maths resits were downloaded, reviewed, and collated. Our analysis focused on identifying how resit policy has been framed, developed, and debated over time. Following an initial reading phase, we generated a set of key policy themes emerging across the documents. These themes reflected recurring concerns in policy aims, implementation, and outcomes, and were used to guide both our analysis and the structure of this report.

The key thematic areas included:

- **Aims of GCSE resit policy**
- **Curriculum** – including the content, value, and role of English and maths
- **Assessment** – qualifications, modes of assessment, and alignment with learners' needs
- **Organisation and leadership** – structures, delivery models, and local variation
- **Accountability and funding** – policy levers, incentives, and compliance pressures
- **Teacher recruitment, development and support**
- **Learner wellbeing, motivation, and self-esteem**

Where appropriate, we also drew on research literature to contextualise and extend our interpretation of the policy landscape, particularly in areas where academic studies offer insight into the implementation or impact of resit policies.

Consultation Survey

Following analysis of the policy documents, we designed a stakeholder consultation survey to explore sector perspectives on GCSE English and maths resit policy. The survey was informed by the themes emerging from the document review and structured around the following key issues:

- Policy aims and priorities
- Curriculum and assessment
- Organisation and leadership
- Learner support needs
- Teacher supply and support
- Accountability and funding

The survey included eight initial statements designed to gauge participants' overall views on the effectiveness and fairness of current policy. Respondents were then invited to give more detailed views on each of the thematic areas listed above.

The survey was disseminated nationally through a wide network of post-16 organisations, as well as through social media and email. It remained open for eight weeks during October and December 2024 and received 122 responses. Of these, 57 were teachers or lecturers in post-16 settings, 45 were college or post-16 leaders, 7 were policy or professional organisation officers and/or researchers, and 13 identified with other roles. Findings from the consultation survey have been synthesised with the policy analysis and are presented across the subsequent sections of the report.

Perspectives from the survey

The survey began with a series of eight statements designed to gauge participants' views on the current GCSE resit policy. The responses (n=109) highlight areas of disagreement and uncertainty, as well as some clear patterns of consensus.

Table 1 – Summary of Survey Responses to Closed-Ended Statements on Post-16 GCSE Resit Policy

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1. The current resit policy (aiming for a grade 4 or above in Maths and English) is effective in improving students' long-term outcomes.	n	16	35	5	35	18
	%	14.7	32.1	4.6	32.1	16.5
2. The curriculum for GCSE resits should be more aligned with vocational and functional skills to better meet learners' needs.	n	11	13	10	36	39
	%	10.1	11.9	9.2	33.0	35.8
3. Resitting GCSEs has a positive impact on students' confidence and overall learning experience.	n	30	39	13	19	7
	%	27.8	36.1	12.0	17.6	6.5
4. The current organisation of resit programmes in post-16 settings is sufficient to support student success.	n	29	47	16	14	3
	%	26.6	43.1	14.7	12.8	2.8
5. There is adequate support and resources available for teachers delivering GCSE resits.	n	19	42	17	26	5
	%	17.4	38.5	15.6	23.9	4.6

6. The resit policy should be reviewed to offer more flexible assessment approaches that recognise progress below a grade 4.	n	4	12	6	27	60
	%	3.7	11.0	5.5	24.8	55.1
7. The current funding and accountability systems create the right conditions for supporting post-16 resit learners.	n	34	50	18	3	4
	%	31.2	45.9	16.5	2.8	3.7
8. Requiring students to continue with GCSE resits beyond age 16 is harmful to their well-being and motivation.	n	15	20	13	42	19
	%	13.8	18.4	11.9	38.5	17.4

Views on the effectiveness of the current policy were notably divided: around half (48.6%) agreed that aiming for a grade 4 or above improves students' long-term outcomes, while a similar proportion (46.8%) disagreed. There was stronger consensus around the need for reform. A large majority (80%) agreed that resit policy should allow for more flexible assessment approaches that recognise progress below grade 4. Likewise, almost seven in ten respondents (68.8%) supported aligning the curriculum more closely with vocational and functional skills to better meet learners' needs.

Respondents were more sceptical about the current system's impact on learners. Nearly two-thirds (63.9%) disagreed that resitting GCSEs has a positive impact on confidence and learning experience, and 55.9% agreed that compulsory resits beyond age 16 are harmful to students' wellbeing and motivation. Just 16% felt that the current organisation of resit programmes is sufficient to support success, and only 28.5% felt there is adequate support for teachers delivering resits. The strongest concerns were raised around policy conditions: over three-quarters (77.1%) disagreed that current funding and accountability systems create the right conditions for supporting learners.

These findings should be interpreted in light of the limitations of the sample. The survey was self-selected and modest in scale. Nevertheless, it included a wide cross-section of professional roles and provider types, and the consistency of themes across questions suggests that it provides a meaningful indication of wider sector sentiment.

Key findings from survey:

- **Split opinion** about whether the current resit policy improves long-term outcomes (49% agree, 47% disagree)
- **80% support** more flexible assessment approaches that recognise progress below grade 4
- **69% agree** the curriculum should be more aligned with vocational and functional skills
- **64% disagree** that resits have a positive impact on student confidence and learning experience
- **56% agree** that requiring students to continue resits beyond age 16 harms wellbeing and motivation
- **70% disagree** that resit programmes are sufficiently organised to support student success
- **56% disagree** that teachers receive adequate support and resources
- **77% disagree** that current funding and accountability systems support resit learners effectively

Policy Perspectives

Below, we take each of the six key policy-related areas and outline overarching perspectives and debates connected with them. Each area is framed by a small number of key questions which we have found to be at the heart of policy discussions and stances relating to GCSE resits.

Area 1: Policy Aims and Priorities

Key Questions: Is the goal of having all students achieve a Grade 4 in GCSE English and Maths the right one? What alternative or additional aims could better support student outcomes?

Points of Debate:

The aim of the Condition of Funding policy is to ensure that learners who have not already achieved Level 2 English and maths are supported to improve their skills and make progress towards this standard (ESFA, 2024). The DfE describe the skills derived from English and maths qualifications as essential for being able to progress in life, learning and work. Extensive literature has also documented the negative impacts and reduced life opportunities (educational, social, and economic) connected to lower levels of English and maths achievement, highlighting concerns for individuals as well as for the economy more widely (Dickerson et al., 2023; Hodge et al., 2021; Lupton et al., 2021; OECD, 2024).

While some sector leaders believe that the policy should be scrapped altogether (Maris, 2024; NAHT, 2024; Whittaker, 2024), others have indicated that some kind of reform would be more beneficial, recognising that Labour have not committed to removing the resits requirement for 16–18-year-olds (Whittaker, 2024). Post-16 organisations such as the AoC (2024) and ASCL have called on the government to review the current GCSE resits policy and offer to students (Middlehurst, 2024). Research-focused colleagues and those involved in providing additional support/interventions to post-16 resit students also assert that while opportunities for continued English and maths study at Level 2 needs to remain, a significant overhaul of the provision, resources and qualifications on offer is needed, if we are to see improved ‘buy in’ from colleges and students and improved outcomes overall (Inside Your Ed Podcast, 2024; Maris, 2024).

The prevailing view from survey participants was that the resits policy in its current form ‘works’ for some students but not for others. These perspectives centred around the focus on the ‘Grade 4’ as a ‘Pass’ level, and the likelihood of students achieving this or not. For those who were likely to attain this grade, the opportunity to resit was generally seen as positive, something that *“can open doors to future jobs and training”* (Post-16 teacher/lecturer in FE College) and that is an appropriate aim for those young people. The perception that achieving a Grade 4 in English or Maths is the primary aim of the policy (as opposed to a focus on more general improvement or progress in relation to these subjects) appears to be one of the key factors informing less-positive perspectives of the policy. According to some participants, the focus on the Grade 4 (and on anything below this being perceived as a ‘Fail’) for students and staff, can make the resit requirement seem unachievable and futile, and can result in negative outcomes in relation to wellbeing, motivation and academic identity:

For some FE students, a grade 4 seems impossible. Even when we tell a learner that they are aiming for the next grade, e.g. a grade 2, they know that they will have 'failed' without a 4. This mindset takes years to overcome and is detrimental to their wellbeing (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

When a qualification like GCSE has a 'pass', there is always going to be a 'fail'. I guess that fits in with many areas of life, but it is not appropriate to brand functioning young people 'failures'. We obviously don't use that explicit language in education circles, but this is the implicit message in the current system. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

Some participants also questioned the standards associated with Grade 4, questioning whether attaining this grade actually aligns with having the necessary level of skills required for employment and life outside of education (this is discussed further in the section below on Curriculum and Assessment). Connected with this viewpoint, there was some consensus from survey participants around widening the scope and offer of eligible qualifications to be taken under the Condition of Funding policy, particularly if the overarching aim is to support learners' skills development in relation to literacy and numeracy. The comments below illustrate these perspectives:

A one size fits all program does not work. We need more pathways for our young people, with recognised options for those who will not be able to achieve Grade 4. They are still able to perform in the workplace and show progress. Why is this not recognised and celebrated? (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

While there are some opportunities, those with grade 3s that continue to not make positive grade progression should be given opportunity to sit the L2 FS [Functional Skills] if appropriate. (Leader of FE College)

These perspectives highlight the tensions between the policy aims of getting more young people to reach the GCSE Grade 4 benchmark in English and maths alongside trying to promote skills progress and development in relation to these subjects. In theory, both intentions should be possible but the (perceived and/or actual) centring of and status afforded to GCSE qualifications and specifically the Grade 4 standard, contributes to a sense that skills development is not a central aim of the policy, at institutional nor national levels.

...what is the aim? If it is to ensure a set level of skills, then it should not matter what the qualification. Functional skills changes in the last few years have not made these a great alternative forcing us back towards the GCSE. Undoubtedly the retaking of it year after year for some learners does impact on their mental health and motivation and this is the aspect that needs revisiting. (Leader of FE College)

The GCSE [Grade 4] demands are high and often at odds with the students' main courses of study...literacy takes years to develop, I think FE teachers simply cannot make great leaps to give someone Level 2 literacy skills over a 9 month period...we often teach to the test because of the time limitations we have and to try to give the students what they want (a pass/ grade 4) to move on with their lives. The love of the subject or literacy as a force for good in its own right have been lost. Teaching English without the confines of an exam would be much nicer but are the government going to fund English lessons that aren't tied to a qualification? (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

The 4 isn't a big ask for most average learners but the resitting FE students generally do not have the literacy level or desire to get the 4. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

For some of these learners, the current policy is not fit for purpose with limited, viable routes onto alternative qualifications such as Functional Skills. Whilst there are opportunities for learners to develop their skills and make progress, the hamster wheel of resits can become demoralising... Whilst I support the need for further English skills development, I do not support the inflexibility of the [GCSE resit] policy when applied in FE as it does not fully recognise the needs of neurodivergent learners. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

A small number of participants reported that the resits policy was not appropriate for students wishing to pursue careers in more 'practical' areas (plastering, bricklaying, and hairdressing were given as examples). Connected to some of the points raised above, these perspectives were rooted in whether it was felt that students would 'need' a GCSE or not (based on their current chosen vocational courses/interests), or whether securing English/maths-related skills should actually be the aim:

Surely if students are not going to need a GCSE, then a qualification where they prove their proficiency in maths and English would be more effective- not one where a certain percentage are always destined to fail. (Leader of FE College)

For learners who know they want to do a more practical career route such as bricklaying or hairdressing, having to resit GCSEs seems very inappropriate. The content of the courses does not align with these careers and functional routes would be far more appropriate. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

These perspectives again reinforce some of the challenges presented in relation to students' current or more immediate goals (which may not include needing a GCSE in English or maths) versus potential future opportunities which may not currently be on their radar, and may or may not be open to them, depending on whether they have achieved the qualification. The focus on supporting young people to achieve a Grade 4 in English and maths appears sensible for those who can see a concrete reason for gaining the qualification; the more challenging – but perhaps no less important – case to make is in relation to potential future opportunities and outcomes that are not yet determined or known.

Summary:

There is broad agreement that improving young people's English and maths skills is an important policy aim. However, stakeholders are divided over whether the current resit policy – focused on achieving a GCSE Grade 4 – is the right vehicle to deliver this. While some see the qualification as essential for progression, others argue that it is inappropriate for many learners and that the system is failing to recognise different needs and starting points. The consultation revealed concerns about clarity of purpose for the policy, buy-in from the sector and young people themselves, and the mismatch between policy ambitions and the resources available to achieve them.

Themes and common perspectives from consultation:

- **Shared purpose, contested means:** There is widespread support for the goal of improving English and maths skills, but many question whether compulsory (and especially repeated) GCSE resits for all learners is the best way to achieve this.

- **Unclear policy objectives:** Stakeholders note that the government has not clearly stated what counts as success – whether it is resit participation, GCSE attainment, or broader skill development.
- **Centralised policy limits local flexibility:** The blanket requirement to re-sit GCSEs restricts colleges and students from making locally informed decisions about the most appropriate learning pathway, such as Functional Skills or alternative qualifications that may better suit individual needs and contexts.
- **Low success rates raise questions of effectiveness:** Many students retake exams multiple times without passing. This challenges the assumption that the current approach is working for those involved with the process.
- **Need to align aims with reality:** Ambitious policy goals are not always backed by appropriate levels of funding, staffing, or support. Without this, even well-intentioned aims risk failure.

Questions for consideration:

- Should the aim be GCSE Grade 4 for all, or something broader and more flexible?
- How should success be measured – by qualifications, skills, or progression outcomes?
- What would a more inclusive and realistic set of aims look like, particularly for learners with low prior attainment or SEND?

Area 2: Curriculum and Assessment

Key Questions: Does the current curriculum strike the right balance between academic, vocational, and functional content? Are there changes needed in how we organise and assess learning?

Points of Debate:

The GCSE curriculum and assessment is a source of contention for many working in the sector. Calls for reformed curriculum and assessment issues are frequently at the heart of concerns raised by stakeholders, including college leaders and teachers, parents and students, and post-16 sector organisations.

Focus and relevance of the curriculum

The GCSE resits curriculum was the most commented on issue within our survey. The perspectives here also echo those which have been shared across various fora by exam boards, subject-related organisations and others working in the post-16 space. One of the major challenges faced is that the GCSE exam specifications tend to become the curriculum for students working towards these qualifications. Due to the limited amount of time available to prepare students for their resits, colleges necessarily tend to focus on the specific requirements of the GCSE exams, with limited opportunity to cover a broader range of topics or to cover some of the examined elements in sufficient depth. This contributes to a sense that the curriculum covered within the GCSE programmes is not relevant or engaging enough for post-16 learners.

When discussing ‘relevance’, distinctions are made between ‘academic’ (or ‘theoretical’) content and ‘applied’ (or more practically/vocationally relevant) content. Nearly 70% of participants agreed that

the curriculum for GCSE resits should be more aligned with vocational and functional skills to better meet learners' needs. These perspectives are illustrated by comments below from survey participants:

The English curriculum is not just 'too academic', it's absolutely ridiculous. It is misleading employers, who assume that a pass at English GCSE means you have decent reading and writing and can complete basic writing tasks in the workplace. No employer needs staff to analyse the use of language in a piece of fictional writing. Both English and maths are miles removed from the experiences of young people at work. (Resit Instructor in FE College)

The majority of students are not able to relate to the content of the GCSEs. I strongly feel that it needs to be relevant and practical. Being able to extract information and main ideas is essential. Using evidence to back up an argument is certainly a key skill, but does every student need to know what an oxymoron is and why the writer has chosen to use it? ... I believe that the transactional writing is essential as it is practical. We all have to write letters and emails. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

For many in the sector, there is a view that post-16 resit students working towards vocationally focused qualifications, do not need to be studying a GCSE programme that is deemed "too academic" (Resit Instructor in FE College). Instead, there are calls for content which aligns more closely with the perceived needs or requirements of the professional roles that students will pursue in future and/or with the broader life skills/knowledge (e.g. having a mortgage, pensions, writing an application letter). Another suggestion was for a 'literacy passport', which combined language and literature learning with modules that could transfer between subjects. Some participants suggested that qualifications should be wholly vocationally based, but there was little consensus about this as others felt that linking to only to specific vocational areas would be too restrictive:

A purely vocational approach is a narrow approach; general qualifications that enable the exposure to sources and skills that develop their cultural capital and enable them to move to different industries is important in an ever-changing workforce where people rarely stay in the same job for life. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

Regarding GCSE English, a number of participants suggested that the inclusion of 19th Century, "antiquated texts" (post-16 teacher/lecturer in FE college) was not appropriate within the resit curriculum. Instead, and as captured above, they argued for more focus on basic language and writing skills. A small number also suggested a greater emphasis on speaking/presentation skills too. In relation to maths, colleagues suggesting curriculum reforms argued that the maths programme needed less focus on abstract concepts and algebra.

In addition to the type of content covered, stakeholders have frequently raised the concerns about the number of topics/areas that have to be covered and assessed via the GCSE resit curriculum. This seems to be a particular issue within maths, where colleagues within our survey argued for the removal of some topic areas (e.g. trigonometry).

Maths is slightly different; the volume of skills and presentation of them in exams is off-putting for many learners, which impacts their resilience. This needs attention. Some content could also be cut while still allowing suitable stretch to ensure the qual is fit for purpose. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

In recent calls for changes to policy, sector organisations have also lobbied for a reduction in the number of maths exam papers which students have to take (currently three). Concerns raised above about content/focus and in this section regarding volume of content and assessment have fed into calls for substantial qualification reform, as we outline below.

Qualification reform

Assessment for GCSE resits sparked a lot of interest. Although there were some calls for more ongoing assessments without a final exam, most did not call for wholesale removal of exams. In terms of structure organisation, a unit based/modular approach was preferred by many participants, where students could gain credits for units they have already achieved, allowing them to focus on specific areas or skills which needed further development. One participant suggested a model where examined modules were available more regularly so that students do not have to wait until the end of the academic year to take a 'final' assessment. A small number of respondents felt that the English GCSE could have a foundation paper, akin to that in GCSE maths.

In recent years, there has been substantial discussion around assessment reform with significant focus on the development and promotion of alternative or additional qualifications aimed at resit learners. As has been seen in much of the policy commentary, while there seems to be broad agreement that change in this field could be helpful, there was limited consensus around what post-16 GCSE reform might look like in practice. Colleagues in favour of developing new options suggested that new qualification models might allow for manageable or accessible approaches (including the modular suggestions noted above or the inclusion of coursework elements). Some, however, felt that offering new or additional qualifications could be confusing, and could lead to further challenges around parity of esteem for qualifications taken by post-16 and/or vocational learners:

...the alternative is that we have a myriad of qualifications which parents, students, employers and society don't really understand. The idea of a functional skills exam for construction students is both a watering down of core skills, patronising to all involved and costly and workload inefficient. The vast majority of the GCSE represents the challenges students will face in broader life. An FE-specific literacy and numeracy qualification exists: Functional Skills. Whether we base the exam around a modular approach, use coursework or contextualise to individual vocational areas, SPaG and basic numeracy remain the same. Again, it generally comes across as a watering down of the curriculum to support more students to achieve, without them actually having embedded the relevant skills. (FE Consultant)

As highlighted in this comment and in many others through the survey, the merits and limitations of the Functional Skills qualifications were shared. Some participants noted that these courses could provide a positive option for some students, particularly those working at the lower end of the attainment spectrum. However, it was also clear that while some see the benefit in the more 'practically focused' or 'real life' content of Functional Skills qualifications, they are viewed as having lower status and recognition than GCSEs. Due to various Condition of Funding requirements, they are also often not a viable option for many students.

Summary:

There is broad consensus that the current curriculum and assessment model for post-16 GCSE resits does not adequately meet the needs of learners. While the policy goal of ensuring English and maths proficiency is widely supported, stakeholders argue that the resit curriculum – largely unchanged from the pre-16 model – fails to engage older students, build on their prior learning, or account for their diverse needs. Concerns are also raised about the over-reliance on terminal exams and the limited role of appropriate alternative qualifications. These issues have significant implications for learner motivation, teacher autonomy, and student outcomes.

Themes and common perspectives from consultation:

- **Curriculum design misaligned with learner profile:** Stakeholders consistently report that the existing GCSE curriculum is poorly suited to post-16 learners, many of whom have previously experienced failure. This contributes to low motivation, disengagement, and repeated underperformance.
- **Lack of progression in content:** Students often retake the same course and assessments with minimal changes in approach, leading to a perception of stagnation or futility, rather than progress.
- **Calls for curriculum flexibility:** There is growing support for more flexible, adaptive curricula that allow for incremental skill development, contextualised learning, and stronger links to learners' vocational programmes or life skills.
- **Assessment format as a barrier:** The use of high-stakes terminal exams is widely criticised. Stakeholders propose greater use of formative assessment, modular qualifications, or continuous assessment models to better support student progress.
- **Ambiguity around Functional Skills:** While some see Functional Skills as a more appropriate pathway for certain learners, others raise concerns about inconsistent quality, limited employer recognition, and their status relative to GCSEs.
- **Implications for teaching practice:** Teachers are often constrained by exam specifications and funding rules, limiting opportunities for creative or individualised instruction. There is a perceived need for guidance, support, and autonomy in adapting the curriculum for resit learners.

Questions for consideration:

- Should there be a distinct post-16 curriculum and assessment model for English and maths?
- Can Functional Skills be developed to serve as a credible, respected alternative?
- How might assessment reforms reduce barriers and better reflect learning progress?
- What curriculum structures would empower teachers and better serve learners at different stages of development?

Area 3: Organisation and Leadership

Key Question: How should GCSE resit programmes be organised and delivered within post-16 settings?

Points of Debate:

To date, a small number of research studies have sought to understand effective approaches for the organisation and delivery of GCSE resits within post-16 settings. As part of a review for the DfE, Higton et al. (2017) reported that colleges with strong GCSE resit outcomes tended to employ some, or all, of the following strategies:

- Longer term strategic planning and preparation
- Promotion of the value of English and maths – developing a culture where these subjects/qualifications are considered important
- Diagnostic assessment
- Personalised approaches to learning
- Promoting student engagement and motivation
- The use of specialist English and maths teachers, either in a centralised ‘resits’ department or based in vocational subject areas.

Despite the association between these approaches and colleges with good performance, there is currently little causal (as opposed to correlational and anecdotal) evidence on the effectiveness of these approaches, and what we do have suggests mixed results. Runge et al. (2019), for example, examined the potential of training English and maths teachers to contextualise the GCSE resits curriculum. Findings from the pilot study were very mixed, with very limited use of contextualised approaches and many teachers reporting that they felt that it was an approach better suited to Functional Skills programmes rather than GCSE. Some teachers reported that the non-contextualised GCSE exams meant that making links to students’ vocational subjects was often not seen as helpful or relevant to them tackling the exam-style questions. Moreover, and as has been found elsewhere (Crisp et al., 2023), they challenged the assumption that contextualisation would lead to increased engagement or interest from students.

Responses to our survey indicated a clear consensus that English and maths should be taught by specialist teachers in discrete English/maths classes, rather than via vocationally focused programmes or teachers. Participants felt that teachers’ subject knowledge, experience and expertise was important for supporting students effectively through the GCSE programme, but also for ensuring they have developed the necessary skills to take forward beyond college.

As a maths teacher I am biased but do believe that maths is a specialist skill and needs to be taught independently from vocational areas. All college courses contain maths that is relevant to that vocational area but as we need a flexible economy for the future, they need maths skills beyond the vocational areas. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

Colleagues also noted, however, that close collaboration and communication between English/maths and vocational teams is needed to share important information about the learners and to support with ensuring that resits can be viewed as an integral part of students’ overall programme, rather than as an ‘add on’. For this teacher, specialist English and maths teachers were based within vocational

subject areas, an approach that they found was helpful for encouraging 'buy in' for the resits as well as for making valuable connections between students' vocational and academic areas of study.

In my FE setting, GCSE teachers are based in departments. This is fantastic, as it not only places more accountability on the department for their GCSE learners, but it also helps learners to see the value and connection between their GCSE studies, their GCSE teachers and their main course...We also advocate for smaller class sizes, which allows for more contact time with learners in lessons and provides a learning environment which is less prone to low level disruption. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

Timetabling was a significant and recurring issue for staff responding to our survey. They provided details of various timetabling approaches to try and maximise student engagement and attendance. This could be challenging in terms of fitting in English and maths around vocational subjects, particularly those which had a high volume of placement or work experience hours which means that students are regularly based 'off site'. A small number of providers shared examples of running evening classes, blocked provision over a short period of time, or online classes. The majority, however, were operating around 3 hours of provision per week, sometimes delivered in single sessions or split across two 90-minute lessons.

We have a standalone maths and English department with specialized teachers and then we support every department. We try to adapt the provision to meet the varying departments – as they are all different. For example, if a course has a high work experience commitment, we try to offer intensive maths and English in blocks before the placement starts, so that the students are not juggling too many balls. We offer evening classes if students need time off during the day to work or have childcare responsibilities, so we try and be flexible and offer more than one solution. (Leader of FE College)

Maths and English timetable first and then the curriculum areas should embed that into their timetables, so students are not coming in just for maths and English – (obviously this does not always work!) (Leader of FE College)

Staffing and funding issues (see below) connected in with matters of timetabling, sometimes disrupting the provision available for students:

We work within a very tight budget so if we have staff off sick, we are very stretched and then do have to sometimes cancel classes etc. (Leader of FE College)

Although there was no shared consensus about which approach is the most effective, shorter classes seemed preferable because of learners' concentration levels, and it was widely agreed that English and maths should be timetabled on the day of vocational classes as attendance is adversely affected if timetabled on separate days. In some colleges, English and maths is timetabled first and vocational areas around this, but this varies both across and within colleges. Some respondents expressed concerns about taking students out of taught sessions or having English and maths at times of independent study.

The start of the academic year 2024 saw a significant increase in the number of students resitting GCSE English and maths. This led to larger class sizes and full teaching timetables. Many respondents commented that they were working over capacity. Concerns were expressed about the lack of resources for teachers, with others claiming that resources are abundant but that teachers opt not use

them. A number of participants shared that there are increasing numbers of students who have specific learning needs and reported that colleges are not always adequately equipped to support these students in English and maths.

Concerns around attendance in FE, and in English and maths resit classes, have been raised in a range of fora recently (Crisp et al., 2023; Hill, 2025). Many college leaders have acknowledged that there is often an issue with poor attendance from some students, and recent research has highlighted some of the multiple and complex reasons why post-16 students do not attend their programmes (see also Area 4 below). Despite this, we still know very little about effective interventions or approaches which could meaningfully tackle and promote attendance in colleges. Previous policies, such as the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) – financial support provided to 16–19-year-olds in full-time education, and which included attendance requirements – have been found to be successful for supporting participation (Britton et al., 2025). The EMA is no longer available for young people in England but does still run for those from vulnerable or less advantaged backgrounds in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In the absence of political will or budgets to reinstate policies such as the EMA in England, it is important to consider how attendance in English, maths, and other wider vocational subjects, can be improved as a means of fostering greater engagement with learning and attainment.

Finally, the importance of college culture was raised by a number of survey participants, echoing findings from the study by Higton et al (2017). Strong leadership was identified as integral to promoting an ethos which recognised the value in English and maths, and promoted progress and success for all. This includes supporting collaboration between vocational subject areas/teachers and those working in English and maths.

A robust approach to E and M must be part of the college ethos. Where I work, this was strong in the past, however, a new deputy principal has started to erode this, and I feel this is partly down to their own dislike for the subjects and their value. In 2015 the mentality was very poor, and over the years the English and maths team have got much more buy-in from the vocational areas with good levels of respect and collaboration... (Leader of FE College)

Some colleagues reported the potentially detrimental impacts when the college culture around resits policy and practice is less strong. As well as influencing students' feelings of confidence and motivation about their learning and aspirations, demonstrating a lack of interest or value in English/math resits can also, impact staff recruitment, engagement and motivation.

Where I work, the English and maths lessons take place on the 'corridor of failure' as this was named by the students. No matter how much work we do on building confidence and having a growth mind set, each year you see the students' confidence diminish. This is heartbreaking. It is not building a culture of life-long learning... (Curriculum Lead and Lecturer in FE College)

The college culture is vital to success. If leaders do not believe in the [English and Maths resits] policy, there is no way they can attract good staff or motivate existing staff. (Consultant)

Summary:

The organisation and leadership of post-16 GCSE resits provision is highly variable, with significant implications for learner experience and outcomes. Many institutions face structural constraints – including timetabling, staffing shortages, and funding limitations – that limit their ability to deliver high-quality provision. Senior and middle leaders play a central role in shaping how resits are prioritised, but their capacity to invest in this area is often shaped by external pressures, such as accountability frameworks and funding conditions. While some providers demonstrate innovative and responsive leadership, others struggle to resource or coordinate English and maths provision effectively. There is a clear need for more strategic, system-level thinking about how leadership and organisational structures can better support post-16 resit learners.

Themes and common perspectives from consultation:

- **Timetabling and structural pressures:** Many providers report difficulties aligning resit classes with vocational timetables, resulting in reduced attendance and disengagement. Classes are often scheduled in isolation or at undesirable times, affecting learner motivation and continuity.
- **Leadership prioritisation varies:** There is variation in the extent to which resits are prioritised in post-16 settings. In some, English and maths are treated as peripheral to the main curriculum offer, leading to weaker integration and inconsistent leadership attention.
- **Specialist teaching capacity is limited:** Providers consistently report shortages of qualified English and maths teachers with appropriate expertise in working with post-16 resit learners. This affects the quality and consistency of provision, and raises questions about recruitment, retention, and CPD.
- **Fragmented organisational models:** Provision is often delivered by dispersed teams without shared planning time or consistent departmental structures. This limits opportunities for collaboration, mentoring, and curriculum development.
- **Variability across provider types:** Organisational capacity and leadership approaches differ across FE colleges, sixth forms, and independent training providers. This diversity needs to be better understood and reflected in policy responses.

Questions for consideration:

- How can leadership at provider and system level be supported to treat English and maths resits as a core strategic priority?
- What role can accountability and funding systems play in incentivising effective organisational models?
- How can staffing structures and CPD be improved to ensure learners are taught by confident, capable teachers with subject-specific expertise?
- Should there be greater national guidance or benchmarks on what constitutes effective organisation and leadership for post-16 resits?

Area 4: Learner support and needs

Points of Debate:

One of the core arguments against the GCSE resits policy concerns the impact of re-taking English and maths on young people's engagement, motivation, confidence and wellbeing. Sector organisations have called for a rethink of the policy for these reasons. The NAHT (2024), for example, argue that for many young people the process of resitting can lead to disengagement with learning, while ASCL criticise the "remorseless treadmill of resits" and the "completely demoralising" (Busby, 2024) impact it can have on students. Analyses have highlighted that resit students are more likely to be from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and/or have SEND, and there are concerns that students' poor outcomes in resits could further widen attainment gaps (Maris, 2024). A contrasting position here is that the GCSE resits policy provides young people with opportunities to gain these essential 'gateway' qualifications, thus improving their chances of accessing future educational and career prospects. Advocates of the policy argue that while some students will not reach the Grade 4 standard via the resits programme they should still have the chance to engage with these subjects, develop their skills and make progress, and that this should be valued as an outcome as much as the focus on the Grade 4 (Otty, 2024a, 2024b; Roe and Catherall, 2025).

As highlighted in the recent practice review, there are mixed views from both practitioners and learners on these issues. While there was some agreement that improved results in maths and English GCSEs could be beneficial for future career goals, many participants felt that students' lack of motivation and engagement was often a significant barrier to their resit success, and could in turn have detrimental impacts on their wider attendance and engagement on their vocational courses (Crisp et al., 2023).

These diverse perspectives were also reflected in our consultation survey, where nearly two thirds of respondents (64%) did not agree that resitting GCSEs had a positive impact on students' confidence and overall learning experience. 56% agreed that requiring students to continue with GCSE resits beyond age 16 is harmful to their well-being and motivation.

Comments from several participants indicated that there has been an increase in the number of learners with specific support needs, either with or without an EHCP. This has led to increased class sizes which negatively impacts on SEND learners. There are more students with Exam Access Arrangements (EAAs) without EHCPs as many learners have undiagnosed learning difficulties.

Many participants expressed concerns about the stigma around repeating GCSEs year after year and the impact this has on learners' mental health. For many, the ongoing cycle of resits is problematic and shows that policy is not working. As the end goal for most students is a Grade 4, anything else is considered a failure for learners who then come into further education with low self-esteem which can often lead to resentment, even when teachers work hard to reassure learners that achieving the next grade is progress:

For some FE students, a grade 4 seems impossible. Even when we tell a learner that they are aiming for the next grade, e.g. a grade 2, they know that they will have 'failed' without a 4. This mindset takes years to overcome and is detrimental to their wellbeing. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

There is a range of emotions related to maths. Resit students are made to feel like failures because of the Grade 4 and so the first thing is to try to celebrate where students are and facilitate progress and build confidence. (Maths Consultant)

Participants talked about the trauma experienced by learners on exam days and the demotivation experienced by learners who have worked hard but got the same grade due to the changing of grade boundaries. Some respondents felt that there should be greater flexibility in the policy to allow exemptions for students whose are experiencing poor mental health. In contrast, there was also a sense from a few participants that teachers need to support learners to develop their resilience.

Concern was expressed by some participants about the impact the policy has on young people and lack of support available to them:

Repeatedly taking exams is demoralising and demotivating for anyone, especially at a young vulnerable age. We find the ones that want to do well often do, those that have become demotivated will not succeed. There is often a lack of support to encourage these students from the home environment. At college there are a number of incentives to get them to engage, but often they are told by parents that it doesn't matter. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

There was a consensus that learners with a grade 1 should not be expected to get a grade 4 in their resit year as this is likely to take 3 years, so progress should be recognised, mirroring the views of Ainscough (2024).

Functional Skills was discussed and favoured for some as the feedback and marking turnaround was much quicker, which can help to alleviate stress. Options without a final exam were suggested by a few to help remove some of the pressures felt by students. However, the robustness of the Functional Skills qualification was questioned by many, with a number of practitioners noting that they no longer use it within their college.

The variety within responses to questions on learner need can be summarised with this comment:

Re-sits can be both beneficial and demotivating. For some students, they offer a second chance, while others experience repeated failure, which can affect their confidence and mental health. There are concerns about the level of support available for these learners. (Head of Department in FE College)

Provision of further coaching, counselling and mental health support was suggested by some participants to enable young people to make progress and overcome some of these challenges.

Responses to our survey also indicate that the policy is not effective for some SEND learners and/or those with a Grade 1 or 2 in their first GCSE attempt. Some colleagues argued that the requirement for these learners to study for numerous resit attempts can be damaging and should be avoided where possible. Moreover, there is sometimes little connection between the organisation of the resits and learners' main courses. Adaptation of the policy (both at government and college level) to enable students to work towards a GCSE resit later in their post-16 career may be helpful, as outlined by this leader:

It would be better if colleges had more freedom to cover GCSEs over multiple years to match the students study program at college e.g. if a student is likely to be studying at college for 2

years, then the GCSE should be able to run over 2 years to give students more opportunity to build their knowledge and skills before sitting the exam again. (Leader of FE College)

Summary:

Learners undertaking GCSE resits post-16 face a complex range of challenges, including low confidence, repeated academic failure, mental health pressures, and a sense of demotivation. These challenges are often compounded by large class sizes, limited individual attention, and a lack of targeted support. While some learners are motivated and capable of making progress, many require more tailored and sustained support than current provision offers. Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted the emotional toll of repeated resits, particularly for those with SEND or other additional needs. Current approaches to learner support vary widely and are often constrained by resourcing and policy limitations. There is a pressing need to develop more coherent, equitable, and adequately resourced systems of support that recognise learners' diverse needs and circumstances.

Themes and common perspectives from consultation:

- **Emotional impact of repeated resits:** Many learners experience cycles of failure, frustration, and anxiety. This repeated exposure to high-stakes assessment with little evidence of progress can damage self-esteem and reinforce disengagement.
- **Insufficient differentiation and flexibility:** There is a perception that a 'one-size-fits-all model' offers limited pathways for learners with SEND, low prior attainment, or high support needs. For some, the standard GCSE curriculum remains out of reach despite best efforts.
- **Lack of targeted pastoral and academic support:** Providers report that additional support – such as learning assistants, mentors, or access to mental health services – is often unavailable or inconsistent. Learners are sometimes left to navigate resits with minimal scaffolding.
- **Class size and contact time barriers:** Large groups and limited hours of teaching reduce opportunities for personalised teaching and relationship-building. This is especially problematic for learners with complex needs or low starting points.
- **Motivation and mindset matter – but require nurturing:** While some learners do succeed with the right support and encouragement, many report feelings of hopelessness or futility. Shifting the focus from 'pass/fail' to 'progress and development' may support with improving confidence and engagement.
- **Limited awareness and utilisation of learner-centred approaches:** Approaches such as trauma-informed teaching, embedded learner voice, and more formative assessment structures are not widely implemented, despite their potential to support re-engagement and progress.
- **The discourse of 'failure' associated with achieving an outcome below Grade 4:** connected to many of the concerns above was a view that the policy encourages focus on Grade 4 as a 'Passing' grade, thus suggesting that Grade 1-3 outcomes, and progress across and within these grades, is under-valued.

Questions for consideration:

- How can we better identify and respond to the emotional and educational needs of learners repeating GCSEs?
- What infrastructure (staffing, funding, guidance) is needed to ensure wraparound support is available and effective?
- Should the policy allow greater flexibility for learners who are not ready for, or not suited to, the GCSE route?
- How can we promote learner progress and confidence, not just exam outcomes?

Area 5: Teacher recruitment, development and support

Points of Debate:

Teacher shortage has been a significant concern within the English education sector (both schools and colleges) for decades. For post-16 providers, increasing numbers of students, relatively low salaries (compared with schools and in industry) and high workloads have contributed to ongoing recruitment challenges (Flemons et al., 2024; Hill, 2025b). This year, the National Audit Office (NAO, 2025) predicted that between 8,400 and 12,400 more teachers would be needed in colleges by 2028/29. Retention is also challenging with high numbers of teachers leaving the sector after just a few years in post. The shortage of maths teachers in the UK has been well-documented in recent years (see Noyes and Dalby, 2020) and unsurprisingly has significant impacts on post-16 providers' abilities to attract well-qualified teachers to deliver GCSE resits. Noyes, Dalby and colleagues (2020, 2022) have highlighted the need for improved teacher training and professional development for FE maths teachers, and have also called for a national training strategy which distinguishes between teachers undergoing a career change, those changing their subject focus, and those working in a different context (e.g. moving from schools to FE).

A key theme from the survey centred on the value of high-quality teaching staff over other areas of post-16 resourcing or infrastructure. Colleagues shared the need for resit teachers who were enthusiastic about their roles and the young people they work, and have been well-trained to communicate effectively with their learners and meet their needs, as illustrated by this college leader:

What we need, to offer our young people the best opportunities, is to have the best people to work with them. I have worked with post-16 learners for over 20 years and where I have witnessed the best engagement and outcomes has been where the people working with learners have wanted to be there, have wanted to help and have had the right skillset.... We don't need fancy resources and research projects with thousands of pounds worth of funding, we need people who can communicate with young people, we can teach them how to teach, the most important factor is that they want to help, they can build rapport with these learners and help them. (Department Manager for English and Maths, FE College)

Some respondents shared their perspectives and experiences on the factors contributing to teacher shortages in post-16. Many expressed concerns about high workload and the impact of this on their

abilities to deliver the highest-quality English or maths lessons. Some were clear though that this was an issue across both schools and colleges, often exacerbated by administrative tasks. The participant quoted below particularly highlighted the workload challenges faced by full-time teachers who were also undertaking in-service teacher training qualifications, as well as the unsatisfactory training that she felt was on offer:

Workload is tremendously bad. Due to low pass rates we are constantly under scrutiny from SLT. We spend too long doing admin and not enough time thinking and planning about what our students need. Training has always been inadequate and run by people with less experience than most teachers. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

A number of participants commented that feelings of stress had also gotten worse due to working with larger classes, with often disengaged or challenging learners, as well as accountability pressures.

The findings of our survey strengthen calls from sector organisations (such as from the AoC, 2025) for more equitable pay and conditions, and a need for high quality CPD that can be accessed by all teachers. Crucially, practitioners highlighted the need for subject and qualification-specific professional development, often noting that this has been lacking in their careers thus far. From our survey, just 29% of participants agreed that there were adequate support and resources available for teachers delivering GCSE resits. It is not completely clear, however, whether this refers to availability within the contexts where they work (i.e. colleges supporting and funding CPD opportunities) or more broadly (i.e. whether the desired training is available at all). Participants reported that CPD is frequently done in-house, delivered by non-specialists, and is often generic (for example 'how to write a lesson plan') rather than being subject or qualification specific:

High quality CPD is an issue – there just isn't a pool of quality practitioners to draw from [within the FE sector]. How do we hold great CPD if every teacher in a department has presided over an 80% failure rate? (Consultant)

Where there is subject-specific professional development available, this is more likely to focus on maths than English (Crisp et al., 2023) and externally delivered CPD tends to be viewed as too costly for colleges, many of whom are facing ongoing financial challenges. Some respondents also noted that securing college support for attendance at CPD was difficult because of cover costs and the lack of available supply teachers. Staff wanting to complete accredited higher-level courses, such as Masters programmes, usually have to self-fund, although we are aware of a small number of opportunities provided by the AoC's Research Further programme, and the funded National MA Education (Wales) for teachers based in Wales.

Recruiting resit teachers is particularly challenging as organisations do not know student numbers until after GCSE results day (in August). Recruiting specialist, qualified teachers is a challenge for most colleges, but some participants felt that 'growing from within' has been an effective strategy for their institutions. One participant commented that teachers with high level subject specific qualifications are not always able to communicate most effectively with learners, and they had more success training staff who have an aptitude for the subject and a willingness to work with young people. Another suggestion was to introduce specialist career pathways to support most vulnerable learners and for all teachers to have some SEND training.

Suggestions on a more conducive working environment included:

A lesser timetable (say 18 hours instead of 24) would support this, as would a revision of the resources staff need: a proper induction period, a working laptop/ computer, a singular classroom as a base, a staffroom etc. Mimicking the school environment would support improved and more effective teaching in the short, medium and long term. (Consultant)

Finally, one participant talked about the importance of research activity for teachers as part of CPD:

Research aimed at improving teaching methods and learning outcomes for GCSE resits is essential, yet recruiting teachers to participate in such studies has proven difficult. Teachers frequently cannot commit to research activities due to the difficulty of securing cover for their lessons, particularly as substitutes with the necessary subject expertise are scarce. This lack of participation limits access to new, evidence-based strategies that could enhance student outcomes, leaving teachers without the research-backed tools they need to address the unique challenges of post-16 resits. (Leader of FE College)

There was consensus about the challenge of recruiting qualified and experienced teachers, particularly in maths. This means that other, non-specialist teachers need to be used which can compromise quality. A few respondents also commented on the additional costs incurred to put on exams which are not recouped.

Summary:

The effectiveness of post-16 GCSE resit provision is closely tied to the availability, preparedness, and support of English and maths teachers. Stakeholders across the sector report persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff, particularly in FE colleges. These challenges are compounded by high workloads, limited professional development, and the, often, low status attached to resit teaching. Many teachers do not have subject-specific qualifications or specialist training for working with resit learners, and institutions struggle to provide consistent, high-quality provision as a result. The scale of the staffing challenge raises important questions about the sustainability of current policy, and whether adequate support is in place for the workforce tasked with delivering its aims.

Themes and common perspectives from consultation:

- **Teacher shortages in English and maths:** Most providers report difficulties finding and keeping staff with the necessary qualifications and confidence to deliver GCSE resit content effectively. This is especially acute in FE, where demand is highest.
- **Underdeveloped CPD and training:** There is little systematic support for teachers delivering GCSE resits, especially in understanding the needs of disengaged or previously low-attaining learners. Many teachers rely on general experience or *ad hoc* support.
- **Workload and morale concerns:** Teachers delivering resits often face large groups, compressed timetables, and high accountability, with little recognition or reward. These conditions contribute to burnout and high turnover.
- **Inconsistent staffing models:** Some providers rely on generalist staff, vocational tutors, or external agencies to cover resit provision, with varying levels of success. Others lack continuity due to reliance on short-term or part-time staff.

- **Impacts on learner experience:** The lack of experienced, confident teachers affects engagement, attendance, and outcomes. Students notice when staff are under pressure or unfamiliar with the content.
- **Limited strategic workforce planning:** There is little evidence of joined-up national strategy to build a specialist resit teaching workforce. Stakeholders call for clearer pathways, incentives, and resources to strengthen staffing capacity.

Questions for consideration:

- What would it take to make resit teaching a valued, specialist role with appropriate training and support?
- How can CPD be improved to help teachers meet the specific needs of resit learners?
- What levers – policy, funding, leadership – could be used to improve workforce sustainability?
- Are there innovative approaches for supporting teacher recruitment, retention and development in the post-16 sector?
- Should there be national guidance or expectations on qualification levels and staffing structures for resit provision?

Area 6: Accountability and funding

Points of Debate:

Many of the concerns relating to GCSE resits stem from the Condition of Funding, whereby receipt of government funding for post-16 settings is dependent on students continuing to study English and/or maths if they did not achieve a Grade 4 in their first GCSE attempt. This direct link between institutional funding and continued English/math study is viewed as sensible by some, as it is a way of incentivising post-16 institutions to ensure at least some prioritisation for the delivery English/math, with a view to increasing the numbers of students achieving a Level 2 qualification. For others, however, the condition of funding means a lack of flexibility and autonomy for colleges, meaning that student academic and non-academic needs are not always being adequately met (AoC, 2024). Critics of the policy suggest that it is a ‘blunt tool’ which does not take into account the concerns of some college leaders/teachers and the views/experiences of students and their families (AoC, 2024; Whittaker, 2024).

Connecting with some of these issues, our survey found that just 6.5% of respondents agreed that the current funding and accountability systems create the right conditions for supporting post-16 resit learners. The majority (77%) disagreed with this statement. A small number of positive respondents noted that the Condition of Funding and resits policy has achieved its aim as the profile of GCSE English and maths has been raised in colleges, as illustrated by this comment:

It seems to work for us, we have put maths and English high on the agenda unlike years before when it was just tacked on to vocational courses. Our students see that attaining maths and English will get them on higher courses and increase their earning potential. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

By contrast, opposing views claim that the policy can be costly and does not offer value for money as the focus is on capturing the government funding rather than on learners and their progress. As a result, colleges are not always able to deliver the best quality provision:

Some colleges are paying lip service to English & maths provision, scheduling the bare minimum of hours in oversized classes in order to attract the funding. Others, find that in order to deliver quality provision and give students the best opportunity to achieve is costing additional money. The additional money assigned through the 16-19 tuition fund is too prescriptive so colleges find they are unable to claim all of the funds they should be entitled to. (Teacher/lecturer in FE College)

While the Condition of Funding seems to ensure that colleges deliver English and maths programmes to those who achieved below a Grade 4 in their GCSE, there are concerns that there is no further accountability in terms of the quality of provision and the outcomes of the young people involved. Some respondents commented that there are very few incentives for colleges and teachers to seek to improve their resit delivery results.

What happens to a college were not a single student achieves in English & Maths? At present, nothing. Some serious questions, maybe some difficult conversations, but minimal formal activity. (Consultant)

A couple of respondents argued for reforms to post-16 Ofsted inspections to promote closer scrutiny of resits provision and results. Another suggested that the policy could be improved by having funding tied to progress, with additional funding made available to support students' behaviour and learning needs:

Flexible Funding Tied to Progress: Rather than solely linking funding to grade 4 achievements, funding models could reward institutions for demonstrating student progress from their starting points. This approach would better reflect the efforts of teachers and institutions in improving students' skills, even if grade 4 is not achieved, and could reduce the pressure to enforce resit attendance for disengaged learners. (Leader of FE College)

Ultimately, while some respondents see the current system as a pragmatic way to ensure that English and maths are prioritised, many others feel that it does not represent a sustainable or effective model. The current structures were widely described as misaligned with the actual work of teaching and supporting resit learners in college settings.

Summary:

The structure of accountability and funding is central to how post-16 GCSE resits are delivered, prioritised, and experienced. The Condition of Funding has been effective in driving up participation, but has also introduced rigid compliance pressures that may undermine quality and localised decision making. Providers are expected to deliver high-stakes qualifications under constrained funding and inspection regimes, often with minimal guidance or flexibility. Many stakeholders argue that the current policy model prioritises volume and participation over progress and appropriateness, with limited regard to cost-effectiveness or long-term outcomes. There is a repeated call for accountability and funding mechanisms to better align with learners' needs, provider capacity, and the realities of teaching English and maths in post-16 education.

Themes and common perspectives from consultation:

- **Funding tied to GCSE-only participation:** The Condition of Funding requires learners without a Grade 4 to study English and maths, with GCSE as the default route for those with a Grade 3. This has led to high participation but uneven outcomes.
- **Perverse incentives and compliance-driven decisions:** Some institutions enrol students on GCSEs for funding reasons even when alternatives might be more suitable. Stakeholders report frustration with the inflexibility of the system.
- **Underfunding and limited sustainability:** Providers often describe the current funding level as insufficient to deliver high-quality provision, especially under the increased 4-hour contact requirement.
- **Accountability and incentivising quality:** In some cases, low emphasis on English and maths in performance measures or inspection frameworks contributes to underinvestment. There is a need to consider whether current accountability systems adequately encourage high-quality resit provision.
- **Lack of strategic alignment:** Funding, accountability, curriculum, and learner support systems are often misaligned, creating operational and ethical tensions for provider leaders.

Questions for consideration:

- Is the current funding model sufficient and sustainable for delivering effective resit provision? What alternatives could/should be considered?
- How could accountability shift from compliance-based participation to encouraging appropriate and aspirational outcomes?
- What incentives or flexibilities could support alternative qualification pathways?
- Should Ofsted and other accountability bodies give greater weight to English and maths resits in their evaluations?

New Directions for Post-16 Resit Policy

This final section draws together insights from across the consultation and policy mapping to reflect on the future of post-16 GCSE English and maths resit policy. It is not intended to offer a blueprint for reform. Rather, it highlights systemic challenges, cross-cutting themes, and opportunities for rethinking how resit policy is developed, delivered, and evaluated, based on the advice and perspectives we have reviewed.

Throughout the consultation, stakeholders voiced strong and consistent concerns about the current approach – not only in terms of outcomes, but also in relation to fairness, feasibility, and long-term effectiveness. Yet there was also a clear appetite for constructive change. Across sectors and roles, participants showed a willingness to engage critically with current policy and to contribute to a more coherent and fit for purpose system.

This section provides a framework for that ongoing dialogue. It begins by identifying cross-cutting challenges that affect multiple aspects of the current system. It then sets out a series of high-level principles to guide future policy thinking, followed by a range of possible directions for change. The

penultimate section discusses the role of research and evidence, and associated research capacity. The final reflection considers the risks of inaction and the case for rebalancing the current model.

The aim is to provide a constructive contribution to future debates – one that centres the voices of those who work with and support learners every day, and that takes seriously the ambition to improve English and maths outcomes in ways that are equitable, sustainable, and evidence-informed.

Cross-Cutting Challenges

The findings across all six policy areas point to a set of persistent and interlocking challenges that affect the coherence, fairness, and effectiveness of the current approach to post-16 GCSE English and maths resits. These challenges are systemic rather than isolated – they span curriculum, staffing, support, accountability, and funding. They also reflect deeper tensions between the aims of policy and the realities of practice. Below, we identify six cross-cutting challenges raised consistently through the consultation and supported by the policy mapping.

Policy ambition without delivery capacity – Across the consultation, stakeholders endorsed the ambition of improving English and maths outcomes for young people. However, many questioned whether providers are resourced or supported to deliver on that goal. The aspiration to provide meaningful opportunities for all 16–19-year-olds is clear, but delivery mechanisms – including staffing, funding, and support structures – have not kept pace with policy expectations.

Misalignment between learner needs and system design – Learners resitting English and maths post-16 are a highly diverse group – including care-experienced young people, students with SEND, those with prior trauma around schooling, and others who narrowly missed a grade 4. Yet the current system largely assumes uniformity in curriculum, qualification route, and assessment model.

Low-status teaching and job satisfaction – Area 5 highlighted the structural and cultural challenges facing those who teach resit classes. These roles are often viewed as low-status, hard-to-staff, and unsupported. Teachers are frequently expected to deliver GCSE content to large, mixed-ability groups with little preparation or CPD. Staff turnover, temporary contracts, and stress were common themes. This has consequences for teacher morale, and for learner experience and institutional stability.

Incentive structures that promote compliance over quality – Accountability and funding mechanisms – discussed in detail in Area 6 – incentivise participation in GCSE resits, but do not reward quality or progress. The Condition of Funding compels providers to enrol eligible learners, but does not distinguish between meaningful learning and procedural compliance. Several leaders described how they feel forced to prioritise short-term metrics over long-term learner development. This creates a distorted landscape in which institutional behaviour is shaped more by rules than by professional judgement.

Uneven learner experience across settings – The consultation revealed significant variation in how resits are organised and experienced across provider types – a theme reflected in Areas 3 and 4. Large FE colleges may enrol hundreds of resit learners with limited individual support, while sixth forms or school-based settings may integrate provision into a broader pastoral framework. Yet national policy often assumes a uniform delivery model. This variation affects not only provision quality, but also learner perception and engagement.

Fragmented and under-evidenced policymaking – Finally, a recurring theme across all areas – and especially addressed in Section 5 of this report – is the limited research and evaluation base underpinning current policy. Stakeholders reported frustration at policy change outpacing evidence, and at the lack of robust data on what works, for whom, and in what contexts. There is also limited co-production of policy, with learners, staff, and researchers rarely involved in shaping the frameworks that govern their work. This lack of integration between research, practice, and policy design limits the potential for innovation and meaningful improvement.

Principles for Future Policy

The findings from this consultation suggest a need for a strategic shift in how post-16 English and maths policy is developed, implemented, and supported. Rather than setting out a definitive model, we propose five principles that could guide the future development of policy in this area. These principles reflect a shared desire for a more coherent, context-sensitive and sustainable approach – one that values progression, professional expertise, and evidence-informed decision making.

Progression – Progress – not just attainment – should be recognised and rewarded. While securing a GCSE Grade 4 remains important, stakeholders repeatedly stressed that progress in confidence, attendance, literacy, numeracy, and engagement are also vital outcomes. Policy should incentivise and reward providers for enabling learners to move forward, not just pass an exam.

Coherence – The design of post-16 resit policy needs to be aligned across curriculum, assessment, funding, staffing, and support. Currently, these elements often pull in different directions – for example, curriculum models that do not fit available teaching time, or accountability metrics that fail to reflect learner growth. A coherent system would ensure that policies work in tandem rather than at cross-purposes, enabling providers to focus on high-quality teaching and learner outcomes.

Learner Agency and Support – The potential value of GCSE resits, and the opportunities available to those who do go on to make progress are significant. Many, however, are concerned about learners repeatedly having to undertake GCSE resit qualifications, often resulting in a sense of ‘failure’ for those who do not reach the Grade 4 standard. An element of learner choice (perhaps after one compulsory attempt at the resit) may be sensible, ensuring that there is also high-quality and sustained support available for those who are engaged with resit programmes of study.

Developing specialist post-16 English and maths capacity – Improving post-16 GCSE resit provision requires sustained investment in a specialist teaching workforce with the expertise, support, and professional identity needed to work effectively with resit and other post-16 learners. Too often, those delivering English and maths in colleges are organisationally marginalised, isolated from wider subject communities, and given limited access to targeted CPD or clear career pathways. This also requires greater trust in teachers’ and learners’ professional judgement, rather than reliance on blanket policy rules about what is best for all young people.

Sustainability – Policy should be deliverable under real-world conditions. Several participants questioned whether the current arrangements were sustainable, with providers stretched thin across staffing, time, and resources. A sustainable system would acknowledge these constraints, promote long-term planning, invest appropriately in provision, and avoid reliance on short-term fixes or compliance workarounds.

Options for Change

This section sets out a set of potential directions for change, informed by the evidence gathered across the policy areas. These are offered not as prescriptive recommendations, but as starting points for further discussion, design, and testing.

1. Redesigning accountability and funding systems

Current accountability mechanisms often reward compliance rather than impact. Providers feel pressure to enrol learners regardless of readiness, and success is often judged by Grade 4 pass rates rather than learner development. Stakeholders suggested that a more outcomes-focused and learner-sensitive model could encourage better provision.

Possible directions:

- Develop metrics that reward learner progress, not just attainment of grade 4
- Adjust funding models to reflect the real costs of resit provision, including CPD and support
- Ensure inspection frameworks consider the quality and appropriateness of resit provision

2. Strengthening the workforce

Teacher supply, training, and retention were key concerns. Improving outcomes and experiences for resit learners will require a supported, specialist workforce. Participants called for more professional development, career recognition, and staffing models that support continuity and expertise.

Possible directions:

- Fund and mandate high-quality subject-specific CPD for English and maths resit teachers
- Create specialist roles or pathways within the post-16 workforce for resit provision
- Improve pay and contract conditions to attract and retain experienced staff

3. Investing in learner support

The resit policy landscape often overlooks the role of learner agency, wellbeing, motivation, and personal support. Yet as Areas 3 and 4 (above) highlight, pastoral care, relational teaching, and contextual understanding are critical to re-engagement and success. Significance and investment in support for learners with SEND is needed.

Possible directions:

- Build minimum expectations for learner support into funding or accountability frameworks
- Further develop and support inclusive and effective approaches to post-16 teaching
- Encourage models that integrate academic, emotional, and motivational support

4. Broadening qualification pathways

There is debate over whether the GCSE should be the primary or only available or acceptable route. Many stakeholders supported a more flexible model that enables or allows other qualification options for learners – including Functional Skills, alternative Level 2 options, or modular GCSE approaches – particularly for learners for whom a full GCSE resit may not be appropriate. Others suggested more flexibility with the notion of repeated resits, while some also argued for the avoidance of creating or

reinforcing a ‘two tier’ system with the well-regarded and recognised GCSE qualification only being available for some learners.

Possible directions:

- Examine possibilities for alternative pathways for learners for whom the GCSE qualification may be unsuitable.
- Explore GCSE resit study being compulsory for just one attempt. Further attempts at gaining the qualification could be based upon student choice.
- Consider modular or staged assessment approaches to build learner confidence, promote progress and enable the GCSE qualification to fit around students’ wider programmes of study (e.g. vocational qualifications).

5. Promoting locally led, evidence-informed innovation

Several participants argued for greater flexibility to develop local solutions and pilot alternative models. Post-16 providers want to innovate, but need space, time, and permission to do so – ideally backed by investment, evaluation and support.

Possible directions:

- Create funded pilots or pathfinder programmes to trial new models and approaches to delivery.
- Further develop the evidence base around post-16 teaching, learning, workforce, and leadership and promote and incentivise evidence use across the sector.
- Link innovation to research and evaluation infrastructure and networks (see Section 5 above)

Each of these options reflects findings from across the consultation and policy review. Together, they suggest that reform should be multidimensional – not focused solely on curriculum, but also on staffing, funding, support, and accountability. Crucially, change should be co-designed with those who will implement it and those whose lives it will affect.

Strengthening the Research and Evidence Ecosystem

The consultation revealed a strong appetite for a more coherent research environment focused on post-16 English and maths resits. Stakeholders called for deeper understanding of what works and why, and for more robust infrastructure to support evidence-informed decisions. While there is promising research in the FE sector, the overall landscape remains underdeveloped, especially compared to schools and HE. As a result, major policies are often made without cumulative or robust evidence.

Key Gaps

Participants identified clear gaps in current research:

- Long-term learner outcomes of resit pathways
- Effective teaching and curriculum models, including alternatives to GCSEs
- Emotional and psychological impacts of resits, especially for disadvantaged learners
- Workforce development for resit teachers and the post-16 workforce more generally
- Effects of accountability and funding systems on practice

These gaps limit the ability of both practitioners and policymakers to improve provision.

Opportunities for Progress

Despite constraints, the consultation surfaced interest in collaboration. Contributors expressed willingness to:

- Build partnerships between FE providers and researchers
- Embed evaluation into reforms from the outset
- Support practitioner-led research through time and funding
- Create networks for sharing evidence and practice

Capacity remains a challenge – but national bodies and funders could play a key role in supporting long-term, mixed methods and context-sensitive inquiry.

Next Steps

We suggest the following priorities:

- Invest in high-quality, post-16 research capacity through targeted funding and partnerships
- Establish a national hub for research, evidence and data on post-16 education
- Create spaces that bring together different types of research and stakeholders – including academic, policy, and practitioner perspectives – to support more connected and context-aware inquiry.
- Enable practitioner-researcher collaboration and co-production
- Involve learners in shaping and interpreting research
- Coordinate research priorities to meet sector needs and reduce duplication

This is not about research for its own sake. A stronger evidence ecosystem is essential for smarter, fairer policy – and for improving outcomes for the many young people navigating resits today.

Concluding Reflection

The current system for post-16 English and maths resits is shaped by a desire to secure foundational skills and qualifications for all young people. Yet this consultation has revealed a striking consensus: while the goals may be widely supported, the means of achieving them are not.

Across the sector, stakeholders reported a system that is often inflexible, under-resourced, and misaligned with learner needs. The requirement to resit GCSE English and maths can offer a ‘second chance’ – but, for many young people, it results in repetition without real progress. Teachers and leaders described working against the grain of policy to deliver the best outcomes they can, but many feel that the current approach is unsustainable and, in some cases, counterproductive.

At the same time, the consultation uncovered a real appetite for change. There is a strong desire for a system that rewards progress, supports learners, and trusts professionals. Practitioners reported wanting reform in this area, but they are asking for reform that makes sense, that fits the realities of their context, and that is grounded in high-quality research and evidence. These are areas for researchers, practitioners and policymakers to urgently work towards as a way to promote the continued achievement and progression of young people within the post-16 sector.

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