

SEPA submission to the 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' White Paper Inquiry

The Education Committee opened an inquiry to examine the Government's proposals for reform of the school system in England, as set out in the [Every Child Achieving and Thriving](#) White Paper.

['Every Child Achieving and Thriving' White Paper Inquiry](#) opened on the 18 June 2026.

SEPA Strategic group submitted a response on 30 July 2026

Education committee published SEPA written evidence on 15 September 2026

Written evidence by Association for Science Education, Institute of Physics, Royal Society of Biology, Royal Society of Chemistry, Science Education Policy Alliance (SEPA), The Royal Society (ECA0113)

Education Committee

Every Child Achieving and Thriving' White Paper

Science Education Policy Alliance (SEPA) brings together the Association for Science Education, the Royal Society, the Institute of Physics, the Royal Society of Biology and the Royal Society of Chemistry. Since 2008, we have worked together to provide a coordinated, evidence-informed voice on science education policy. As an alliance of organisations committed to strengthening science education, we seek to bring together expertise from across the sector to inform policy and practice.

About this submission

Following SEPA's response to the DfE consultation on *Key Stage 4 performance measures and targeted RISE extension*, and subsequent discussions with DfE regarding the proposals and their potential implications, we identified a gap in evidence and sought to gather views through focus groups. SEPA convened two separate focus groups (23 June and 25 June 2026) to gather subject experts' and school leaders' views on the following anticipated changes to science:

- Changes to science within the proposed Progress 8 measure, including the likely implications for curriculum planning, pupil choices, staffing and equity.
- Access to STEM enrichment, and the opportunities and challenges associated with the new Enrichment Framework.

SEPA is submitting this evidence to share insights gathered through these discussions. The submission draws on the perspectives, experiences and observations of focus group participants and is intended to inform understanding of the potential impacts of the proposed changes. SEPA trusts that these findings will, alongside the Department's own surveying activity, help it to clarify its policy on triple science and reforms to Progress 8. It does not seek to advocate a particular policy position but instead presents the views and concerns expressed by participants.

Focus groups

- The participants were identified through their engagement and participation in SEPA organisations' teacher networks.
- Participants included Head and Deputy/Assistant Head; Director of Science; Head of Science; Science Subject Lead; science teacher.

- During the focus groups a SEPA representative presented an overview of the proposed changes, followed by a combination of breakout and plenary discussions chaired by SEPA representatives.
- A follow-up survey was sent out to participants after each of the focus groups to capture any additional points not covered during the discussions. These points have been included in this summary.
- Please note that the evidence presented reflects the perspectives of focus group participants and should be understood as qualitative evidence rather than a representative view of all schools or science education stakeholders.

Key themes and findings

The findings below summarise the key themes emerging from the discussions and highlight areas of both consensus and divergence among participants.

1. Limited anticipated impact of the proposed Progress 8 reforms

Participants generally welcomed the proposed changes to Attainment 8 and Progress 8, including the introduction of dedicated science slots and the possibility of a third science qualification contributing to performance measures. Some participants felt these changes could provide greater recognition for science and may encourage increased uptake.

However, across both groups there was broad agreement that the reforms, in isolation, were unlikely to significantly alter school behaviour or existing curriculum models. Participants reported that decisions about science provision are predominantly influenced by factors such as staffing, timetabling, pupil attainment and resource availability.

Participants also highlighted that accountability measures continue to incentivise secure attainment outcomes, meaning Combined Science may remain the preferred route for some students. Several participants expressed uncertainty about how Triple Science grades would be counted within Progress 8 and how the proposed reforms would interact with wider ambitions to increase access to Triple Science. There were calls for greater clarity regarding the operation of the proposed arrangements and their implications for schools.

2. Variation in Triple Science provision and access

Participants described considerable variation in how Triple Science is offered across schools. While Combined Science was reported to be widely available, access to Triple Science was often more restricted and influenced by factors such as pupil attainment, staffing capacity, timetabling arrangements and curriculum time. Some schools offered Triple Science as a guided option for higher-attaining pupils, while others sought to make it more widely accessible.

Some participants reported the tension between subjects and the need to ensure

breadth, with several reporting that Triple Science had the potential to squeeze out subjects from other disciplines and narrow the subject offer for some students.

Participants also highlighted uncertainty regarding the proposed Triple Science entitlement and how it would operate in practice. There was concern about whether schools would be expected to accommodate all pupils wishing to study Triple Science and what the implications would be for existing curriculum models.

A recurring theme was the tension between widening access to Triple Science and maintaining outcomes and provision across the wider science curriculum. Participants noted that increasing participation in Triple Science could have unintended consequences, including affecting attainment outcomes in both Triple and Combined Science. Several participants described making individualised decisions about qualification pathways based on which route would best support pupil outcomes and progression.

Participants also highlighted concerns that expanding Triple Science provision could place additional demands on curriculum time, laboratory space, equipment and technician support, and could affect the balance of science provision across different key stages.

3. Staffing and resource constraints influence science provision

Participants consistently identified staffing and resourcing challenges as significant factors shaping science provision. Difficulties recruiting and retaining specialist science teachers, particularly in physics, were frequently raised. Participants reported that staffing constraints, timetabling pressures, class sizes, and limitations relating to laboratory space, equipment and technician support often determine what science provision schools are able to offer in practice. Several participants noted that schools already rely on non-specialist teachers to deliver parts of the science curriculum. Participants also raised concerns that expanding Triple Science provision without additional capacity could place further pressure on staffing and resources, affecting the wider delivery of science across key stages.

This issue is compounded by structural differences between schools, with those offering Key Stage 5 provision often better able to attract and retain specialists. A perceived North–South divide was also noted, with northern schools more likely to operate 11–16 models and therefore face greater challenges in building subject expertise.

4. Perceptions of Triple and Combined Science pathways

Participants discussed perceptions of Triple Science as a more prestigious or academically demanding route, often associated with higher-attaining pupils. Some felt these perceptions may discourage participation and contribute to reinforce the socioeconomic division apparent in participation in Triple vs

Combined Science.

There was widespread recognition that Combined Science can provide successful outcomes and progression to post-16 science pathways. Some participants suggested that a single, unified science pathway might reduce these issues and better reflect the value of both routes.

5. Limited awareness of the enrichment benchmarks

Participants reported limited awareness of the recently published enrichment benchmarks. As a result, discussion focused primarily on existing enrichment provision and the practical realities of delivery rather than on the benchmarks themselves.

6. Practical constraints affect the delivery of science enrichment

Participants consistently highlighted practical challenges associated with delivering science enrichment activities. Common barriers included staff capacity, competing priorities within the school calendar, transport arrangements, and resource limitations. Participants noted that the availability of enrichment activities varies considerably between schools and is often shaped by local circumstances. Participants expressed concern that, without addressing barriers, the enrichment benchmarks may have a limited impact on reducing existing variation in enrichment provision between schools.

Rural schools were reported to face particular challenges in offering after-school enrichment due to pupil travel arrangements. Participants also noted that many enrichment activities depend heavily on teacher goodwill, enthusiasm, and departmental capacity.

Some participants expressed uncertainty about the extent to which the benchmarks would influence school practice. There was also scepticism about whether the benchmarks would have a meaningful impact unless they were linked to accountability measures, such as Ofsted expectations.

7. Embedded and partnership-based enrichment approaches were viewed positively

Participants described science enrichment as most sustainable when integrated into curriculum delivery rather than provided as an additional activity outside normal teaching time. Examples included Key Stage 3 STEM project work, science fairs, competitions and field trips, which were viewed positively for supporting pupil engagement and helping to make science more relevant and accessible.

Partnership working was also viewed positively. Participants highlighted collaborations with external organisations and cross-school initiatives as valuable opportunities to broaden pupils' experiences. However, these activities were often described as difficult to organise and sustain due to staffing, logistical and

resource constraints. External funding and support from partner organisations were identified as important factors in enabling enrichment activity.

September 2026