Curriculum and Assessment Review

# Building a world-class curriculum for all

## Final Report

November 2025

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# Foreword

The importance of our national curriculum cannot be overstated. It is an entitlement to the most important knowledge that we expect children and young people to learn, both for their benefit and for the benefit of the nation.

The Review Panel and I have approached the task of reviewing the national curriculum, 16-19 pathways, and their assessment mindful of this responsibility. We have sought to ensure the curriculum is fit for the future, addresses the rich knowledge and skills young people need to thrive in our fast-changing world, and encourages a love of learning.

There are many strengths in our existing curriculum and assessment arrangements. We have sought to build on these strengths, in addition to identifying numerous opportunities for improvement; and we have taken an evidence-led approach in diagnosing problems and their solutions. We have also been mindful of the importance of the school curriculum beyond the national curriculum, and the important things that schools and colleges provide for their students every day: the enrichment activities, sports, performances, work experience and careers advice (to name a few) that provide young people with transferable skills, develop confidence, and bring their learning to life.

It is vital that schools and colleges are able to innovate and respond to local needs, and that teachers have the flexibility to extend the curriculum and draw out its relevance for the young people in their classrooms. As such, we have been mindful both to ensure the national curriculum comprises an aspirational entitlement for all and that there is adequate space for schools and colleges to go beyond it.

All the subjects in the national curriculum are valuable and play an important role in preparing young children for life and work. We have sought to balance breadth with depth, ensuring all young people have access to a portfolio of crucial knowledge balanced with the choice that facilitates a love of learning. We have also sought to ensure that these opportunities are open to all so that young people are not held back by background or circumstance.

I want to thank the huge number of stakeholders that have engaged with the Review process: the schools and colleges that have hosted us; and the children and young people, parents and carers, education staff and leaders, experts and officials who have responded to our Call for Evidence, participated in our polling and attended our events and roundtables. Your passion and expertise have been both enlightening and inspiring. I also want to thank the members of the expert panel, with whom it has been an exceptional privilege to work.

There are so many in our system striving to ensure that every young person has access to an excellent education and develops a thirst for learning that will remain with them for life. My hope is that the recommendations contained in this report will take us a step

closer towards this aspiration by building a world-class curriculum and assessment system for all.

**Professor Becky Francis CBE, Chair of the Curriculum and Assessment Review**

# Executive summary

The national curriculum is an investment in all our young people, for their benefit and for the benefit of the nation. Education is inherently valuable and important for its own sake, but it also plays a crucial role in supporting individual success, in providing young people with the necessary knowledge and skills to build a prosperous economy and flourishing civil society, and in promoting social cohesion and democracy. For these reasons, it is imperative that the national curriculum provides all children and young people with a rich, aspirational, and challenging offer to support high and rising standards.

In July 2024, the Government commissioned Professor Becky Francis CBE to convene and chair a panel of experts (the Review Panel) to conduct a review of the curriculum and assessment system in England (the Review), including qualification pathways, across the primary, secondary and 16-19 phases.

The Review Panel recognises the hard-won successes and educational improvements of recent decades, but it is clear that these have not yet benefited all. We must promote high aspirations and raise standards for the significant group of young people for whom the current system creates barriers. In this way, we can ensure the best life chances for all young people, irrespective of their background.

It is more than a decade since the national curriculum was last reviewed. It is timely that it is now refreshed so that it remains cutting edge and fit for purpose to equip young people for our rapidly changing world. In formulating our recommendations, we have tried to make sure our curriculum enables teachers to impart critical knowledge and inspire a love of learning. This will ensure that young people are supported to flourish as informed and fulfilled individuals, as contributors to our democratic society, and as members of a better qualified workforce that builds economic prosperity.

As a defining feature, the Review has been determinedly evidence-led. Our deliberations have been informed by robust research evidence, analysis of large-scale datasets and a range of commissioned research and polling. We have drawn on a wealth of perspectives from experts, stakeholders and the public, including over 7,000 responses to our Call for Evidence. Our work has been undertaken in close consultation with education professionals and other experts, parents and carers, children and young people, and wider stakeholders such as employers, universities and trade unions.

## Towards a world-class curriculum and assessment system

This Review represents an opportunity to build on what is working well, and to address what is not, to ensure that the curriculum and assessment system in this country is truly world class.

In addition to refreshing the curriculum and ensuring that it reflects the knowledge and skills young people need to achieve and thrive, it is an opportunity to build excellence and support life chances.

It is essential that more children and young people build strong foundations and a love of learning in the primary years, embarking on their secondary education with their literacy and numeracy secure, and with knowledge, confidence and enthusiasm sparked for other subjects.

We must also facilitate more successful transitions into secondary education. Too many young people fall behind at this stage and so we must ensure that more of them maintain their momentum and enthusiasm across a rich and broad array of subjects.

Finally, we must maintain the strong academic core for all that supports life chances and ensure that more young people secure the expected standards in Maths and English. However, we must also grasp the opportunity to ensure that more young people are able to choose qualifications that inspire them, and which speak to their strengths and the directions they wish to take.

As our Interim Report noted, many aspects of the current system are working well. In comparison to other jurisdictions, we have a reasonably broad and balanced curriculum to age 16 which offers all children an entitlement to a core set of knowledge. International comparisons suggest that the present arrangements have had a positive impact on attainment, and we therefore intend to maintain and build on the knowledge-rich approach and on the coherent structural architecture established by the last review.[1]

The present architecture of key stages is generally working well and we recommend retaining it. Likewise, our national assessments and qualifications are, broadly, working well. We therefore recommend that the majority of the present framework arrangements and milestones for the curriculum and assessment remain.

However, our analysis has also identified many areas that need attention. This includes areas where we see significant opportunities and need for improvement, including making improvements to the curriculum and assessment in primary and secondary education and more extensive changes to 16-19 qualifications.

[1] DfE (2011) - Framework for the national curriculum: A report by the Expert Panel for the national curriculum review

## The current system is not working well for all

The socio-economic gap in relation to educational attainment remains stubbornly wide, and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) make less progress than their peers. Whilst the explanations for this often lie outside the curriculum and assessment, the Review has worked to ensure that the system reflects high expectations for all and properly supports all young people's progress and achievement.

Our recommendations aim to improve curriculum quality for all young people but will particularly benefit those for whom the system is currently not working well. We have also made recommendations to support better equity, access and inclusivity in subject areas where we have identified specific barriers to progress. In addition, we have sought to ensure that the curriculum and assessment are helpful to teachers in supporting progress, momentum and successful outcomes as learners move from one key stage to the next.

We also highlight the roles other government agencies and bodies can play in exemplifying how to meet diverse needs in an inclusive mainstream school and in supporting good practice.

## Curriculum shape and challenges with specific subjects

Specific problems with content in some curriculum areas impede the quality of teaching and learning, as well as pupil outcomes. There are tensions with curriculum breadth and depth and, consequently, these present a challenge for schools and colleges in meeting the important local needs and enrichment provision which are highly valued by young people and their parents and carers.

The statutory guidance for the current national curriculum says that it is 'just one element in the education of every child';[2] it was not intended to take up an entire school day. It is important that the national curriculum maintains its position as an ambitious entitlement for all. However, schools must have space to go beyond it to provide innovative practice, locally tailored content, and enrichment activities that help to ensure young people thrive in education and later life.

Evidence supports the need to build secure foundations and mastery of key subject concepts to raise standards and enable the development of expertise. But, in some subjects, the current construction and balance of content appear to be inhibiting this. This may impede mastery and prevent young people developing an appropriate depth of understanding, hindering their progress and undermining standards.

[2] DfE (2013) - National curriculum: primary curriculum

The causes of the tension between breadth and depth are complex.[3] We have therefore discussed these subject by subject. Getting this right will have a beneficial impact on the capacity of schools to make sure children and young people have access to a full range of subjects, and to provide vital enrichment activities. Our recommendations are intended to ensure that teachers have enough flexibility to challenge high attainers and to make sure that those who are struggling with learning can master core concepts, thus ensuring that all children and young people get the best from the curriculum.

Many submissions to our Call for Evidence have argued for improvements in a range of curriculum subjects, some minor, some more significant. We make recommendations to resolve the various subject-specific challenges the Review has identified.

We have also taken steps to ensure that the curriculum (and related material) is inclusive so that all young people can see themselves represented. This should also help them to broaden their horizons and better understand the perspectives of others.

Over the last two decades, some subjects have thrived and seen increased take-up; in others, take-up has declined. The reasons for this are complicated. However, it is clear that the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measures have to some degree unnecessarily constrained students' choices. This has affected their engagement and achievement, and limited their access to, and the time available for, arts and vocational subjects. We endorse the need for a broad and balanced academic curriculum up to 16 for all, but we also recognise the need for a better balance between that entitlement and wider choice. As such, we recommend the removal of the EBacc measures but the retention of the EBacc 'bucket' in Progress 8 under the new title of 'Academic Breadth'.

## The curriculum needs to respond to social and technological change

In a world of rapid technological, environmental and social change, subject-specific knowledge remains the best investment. Being secure in core subjects such as Maths and Science will remain pivotal for young people, now and in the future, as will their understanding of human culture through the humanities, languages, and arts. However, additional knowledge and skills will be needed if we are to maximise young people's opportunities and equip them to meet challenges presented by our fast-changing world. The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and trends in digital information demand heightened media literacy and critical thinking, as well as digital skills. Likewise, global challenges, both social and environmental, require attention to scientific and cultural knowledge and skills.

[3] For example, in some cases, the problem is with over-specification and volume in subject curricula; in others, with under-specification, or other factors.

Young people and their parents or carers have been clear that they would like to see more applied knowledge in certain areas. We have examined the evidence to identify those most in need of critical attention. These include the areas mentioned above, plus important areas such as financial literacy and oracy. We have recommended ways to make sure these are properly incorporated into the curriculum through all key stages. We have also sought to make sure that the scale of the national curriculum does not prevent schools from providing enrichment activities, and building knowledge and transferable skills that are bespoke to their pupils' local needs.

## 16-19 education

A Levels provide successful preparation for university study, whilst T Levels have introduced a new, high-quality, technical route for young people who are clear about their intended career destination. Although teething problems remain, T Levels show great promise. However, A Levels and T Levels are not appropriate for all students. Some have not decided on a career path but have an interest in a particular sector, whilst others want to pursue a career in a sector not currently supported by A Levels or T Levels. A significant proportion of young people take a mix of qualifications and some, although ready to study at level 3, cannot access A Levels or T Levels or seek more applied qualifications that provide a range of progression options. Given the complexity of the existing system, employers, the public and young people themselves are often unclear about suitable pathways.

Furthermore, for young people who did not secure strong level 2 qualifications at school, including those who need to continue studying Maths and English, the quality of provision is uneven and many are not making progress. They include a disproportionate number of young people with SEND and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It is especially important that these challenges are resolved. We therefore recommend the development of a new third pathway at level 3 to sit alongside A Levels and T Levels.

This pathway, based on new qualifications which we recommend calling V Levels, would contribute to a clearer set of pathways for young people during 16-19 education. It would incorporate an ambitious, high-quality and cohesive offer for those not pursuing three A Levels or a T Level to make sure they have access to meaningful and rewarding destinations. We make recommendations for the shape and principles for these pathways, as well as changes to pathways at level 2.

We also make recommendations to drive greater nuance in Maths and English provision for those who have not secured level 2 (the equivalent of GCSE grade 4) in GCSE Maths and English Language at age 16. This includes introducing a level 1 stepped qualification

at 16-19 for those who need greater support.[4] These recommendations are intended to ensure that more young people attain Maths and English at level 2 and make progress during 16-19 study.

## Assessment

The Review has sought to ensure that the assessment system captures the strengths of every young person and the breadth of the curriculum and that it has the right balance of assessment methods. The system must maintain the important role of exams, which are the fairest way of assessing students nationally[5] and which mitigate the risks to assessment posed by generative AI. We consider that the system is broadly working well, with an appropriate balance of formative, diagnostic and summative assessments, and we recommend retaining the broad thrust of the existing arrangements. However, opportunities for improvement exist, such as improving the assessment of pupils' writing at the end of Key Stage 2.

We are keen to support transition into secondary education and students' progress in Key Stage 3 so that more of them maintain their momentum during that key stage and succeed at Key Stage 4. This is especially critical in GCSE Maths and English, since these are a passport to further opportunities. We therefore recommend developing diagnostic Maths and English tests to be taken in Year 8. The aim is to support teachers in identifying and remedying any problems before students progress to Key Stage 4.

England is by no means an international outlier in providing national exams at 16, and these remain important for discerning routes for 16-19. However, it is an outlier with regard to the volume of this assessment. The amount of time that young people spend in exams at Key Stage 4 has become excessive. We reject calls from campaigners to scrap exams at 16. However, time spent on them at GCSE level should be reduced, through a subject-by-subject approach where this can be done without materially affecting reliability and efficacy. We have also made recommendations for improvements to assessment in specific subject areas.

[4] The existing condition of funding requirements to study Maths and English are not impacted by this recommendation.
[5] UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO) (2021) - Should we abolish GCSEs?

## Conclusion

All potential reforms to curriculum and assessment come with trade-offs, and it has been the job of this Review to weigh up and manage these carefully. We have therefore taken a considered approach of ‘evolution not revolution’ in our deliberations and recommendations, which has been widely welcomed. Our recommendations follow extensive consideration of the available options and a balanced appraisal of risk and reward.

Our approach has allowed us to navigate the diverse and often conflicting views that stakeholders have expressed. Many of the matters are extremely complex. Furthermore, some elements of the education system and other factors outside the scope of this Review undoubtedly contribute to the outcomes we have observed.

We also have sought to remain cognisant of the impact that substantial changes to the curriculum and assessment would have on the stability of the wider education system and on the workload of education staff. Our recommended changes are intended to lead to meaningful improvements in outcomes for learners without destabilising the system.

A full list of our recommendations can be found here.

We believe that our vision for a world-leading curriculum and assessment system in England and the recommendations we set out will have a positive impact on the educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people, supporting success for all.

# Introduction

## Background

In July 2024, the Government commissioned Professor Becky Francis CBE to convene and chair a panel of experts (the Review Panel) to conduct a review of curriculum and assessment in England, including qualification pathways (the Review). At the outset of the Review, the Government published its Terms of Reference.

In March 2025, the Review published its Interim Report, which presented initial findings and insights. Our subsequent work has involved further developing and expanding on this analysis to develop a set of recommendations that seek to build a world-leading curriculum and assessment system for all and address the most pressing issues impacting curriculum and assessment in England. This report sets out the Review's methodology, evidence, deliberations and recommendations.

### The Review Panel[6]

- **Professor Becky Francis CBE** (Chair), CEO of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)
- **Gary Aubin**, Gary Aubin, Director of SEND for Whole Education
- **Professor Jo-Anne Baird**, Director of the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment
- **Professor Nic Beech**, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Salford
- **Cassie Buchanan OBE**, CEO of the Charter Schools Educational Trust
- **Professor Zongyi Deng**, Professor of Curriculum and Pedagogy at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London
- **Jon Hutchinson**, Regional Director, East of England, at Reach Foundation
- **John Laramy CBE**, Principal and Chief Executive of Exeter College
- **Dr Vanessa Ogden CBE**, CEO of Mulberry Schools Trust
- **Lisa O'Loughlin**, Principal and CEO of East Lancashire Learning Group
- **Funmilola Stewart**, Trust Assistant Principal at Dixons Academies Trust
- **Sir Ian Bauckham CBE** (Observer), Chief Regulator at the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)

In line with our Terms of Reference, the Review has considered Key Stage 1 through to Key Stage 4, and 16-19 education. In approaching assessment and accountability, we

[6] For detailed biographical information for all members, see: Curriculum and Assessment Review: Set-up

have focused on capturing the strengths of every student while ensuring a robust and fair system.

Several important areas that relate to curriculum and assessment sit outside the scope of this Review, including the Early Years Foundation Stage, pedagogical approaches, careers advice and guidance, work experience and enrichment activities. Education funding, teacher training and development and workforce supply issues are also outside our Terms of Reference.

## Methodology

The Review has been committed to an evidence-led approach. This has been critical in meeting the aims set out in the Terms of Reference to identify and prioritise the most pressing issues facing curriculum and assessment and to recommend practical and deliverable changes that will improve young people's outcomes without destabilising the system.

The Review Panel has undertaken an assessment of stakeholder input, polling data, secondary sources and expert consultation. This evidence base informed the identification of key themes, problem diagnosis and areas requiring support.
The Final Report's recommendations reflect a considered balance between stakeholder perspectives and empirical evidence.

The Review used two main types of evidence:

- Quantitative evidence, including large-scale national and longitudinal datasets and commissioned polling.
- Qualitative evidence gathered from education professionals and other experts, parents and carers, children and young people, and stakeholders such as employers, colleges, universities, and trade unions.

We used publicly available data from the Department for Education (DfE), including national statistics on pupil entries, pupil characteristics, subject uptake, outcomes and post-16 destinations such as further education, apprenticeships and employment.
To complement this, internal DfE datasets provided detailed qualification data linked to school census records and prior attainment. Similarly, a more granular view of curriculum access, subject availability, and learner progression was reached by using teacher feedback from the School and College Voice survey and by analysing 16-19 learners' progression using the Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD) and Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO).

We also polled over 2,000 young people who had just completed their Key Stage 4 and 16-19 exams in summer 2024, and their parents and carers. This polling was

supplemented with surveys undertaken by other organisations, including Parentkind, which surveyed over 5,000 parents across the UK, Teacher Tapp, and Public First.

In addition, the Review has been supported by academic research and policy analysis from organisations. These sources of data and evidence have played a crucial role in helping us to establish present trends, analyse trends over time and interrogate assumptions.

We have gathered qualitative evidence through extensive engagement with the education sector and beyond. A major aspect of this was our Call for Evidence, which ran from 25 September 2024 to 22 November 2024. We received 7,021 responses, including 5,327 individual responses and 1,694 from organisations. This provided a wealth of evidence and feedback on a broad range of issues.[7]

In addition to the Call for Evidence, the Review Panel has:

- Held public events across the country to discuss the themes of the Review as laid out in the Terms of Reference, with over 3,600 attendees. Each roadshow incorporated school and college visits where the Review Chair and members of the Review Panel met students, teachers, lecturers, support staff and leaders to seek their views. These have been supplemented by further school and college visits carried out throughout the Review.
- Hosted webinars, open to all, which reached more than 2,000 people.
- Met with a range of subject and curriculum experts such as subject associations, practitioners and academics to gather feedback and evidence about the subject-specific challenges and opportunities for improvement.
- Held issue-specific roundtables with employers, subject associations and awarding organisations; and oral evidence sessions to gather evidence from experts on key areas such as socio-economic disadvantage and SEND.
- Engaged in external events and gave presentations at conferences.
- Met with officials from other international jurisdictions to better understand their curriculum and assessment systems, approaches to curriculum and assessment reform, and the challenges other jurisdictions face.

Annex 2 provides more details on stakeholder engagement.

We have taken every step to ensure that a wide range of voices and perspectives have been heard. A balanced and considered approach has been taken, given the diverse and often conflicting views expressed by stakeholders.

[7] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence

# Context: curriculum and assessment in England

The following sections provide a brief account of the present curriculum, assessment and accountability system, to provide context for our subsequent analysis and recommendations.

## The national curriculum for Key Stages 1 to 4

All state-funded schools in England are required to teach a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, as stipulated by the Education Act 2002[8] and the Academies Act 2010.[9] The national curriculum is divided into four key stages (Key Stages 1 to 4)[10] and sets out the Programmes of Study for all subjects in these key stages, covering what subjects should be taught and the standards that children and young people should reach in each subject. Different phases of the national curriculum are taught at each key stage and Figure 1 sets out the current national curriculum subjects across the four key stages, as well as the basic curriculum.

The Education Reform Act 1988 introduced the national curriculum, including statutory Programmes of Study and non-statutory guidance for individual subjects. Successive governments have reviewed it in 1993-1995, 1997-1999, 2005-2009, and 2011-2013. Reviews have led to amendments and new requirements.

The national curriculum is statutory for mainstream local authority maintained schools. All state-funded schools are also required to teach the 'basic' curriculum subjects of Religious Education (RE) and Health Education at every key stage, as well as Relationships Education (RHE) in primary education and Relationships and Sex Education (RSHE) in secondary education.

[8] The National Archives (2025) - Education Act 2002
[9] The National Archives (2025) - Academies Act 2010
[10] Key Stage 1 covers Years 1 and 2, Key Stage 2 Years 3 to 6, Key Stage 3 Years 7 to 9 and Key Stage 4 Years 10 and 11. These key stages are bookended by the Early Years Foundation Stage and 16–19 education.

**Figure 1. Curriculum subjects by key stage**

| Subject | Key Stage 1 | Key Stage 2 | Key Stage 3 | Key Stage 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Maths | C | C | C | C+ |
| English | C | C | C | C+ |
| Drama[11] | | | | E |
| Science | C | C | C | C+ |
| Physical Education | F | F | F | F+ |
| Dance[12] | F | F | F | E |
| Computing | F | F | F | F+ |
| Citizenship | F | F | F | F |
| History | F | F | F | E+ |
| Geography | F | F | F | E+ |
| Languages[13] | - | F | F | E+ |
| Design and Technology | F | F | F | E |
| Cooking and Nutrition[14] | F | F | F | - |
| Art and Design | F | F | F | E |
| Music | F | F | F | E |
| Religious Education | B | B | B | B |

[11] Drama sits in English at Key Stages 1 to 4 and has a standalone qualification at Key Stage 4.
[12] Dance sits in PE at Key Stages 1 to 4 and has a standalone qualification at Key Stage 4.
[13] Ancient Languages and/or Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) are statutory at Key Stage 2, but only MFL is statutory at Key Stage 3. At Key Stage 4, students are entitled to study MFL, while either an Ancient Language or an MFL counts towards the EBacc.
[14] Cooking and Nutrition sits in D&T at Key Stages 1 to 3 and is a standalone qualification at Key Stage 4.

| Subject | Key Stage 1 | Key Stage 2 | Key Stage 3 | Key Stage 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| RHE/RSHE[15] | B | B | B | B |

**C** Core subjects: must be taught and are covered in more detail than foundation subjects. At Key Stage 4, these subjects must be taught and are assessed.

**F** Foundation subjects: must be taught but are covered in less detail than core subjects. At Key Stage 4, these subjects must be taught but are not necessarily assessed; some students will choose to study a qualification in them.

**E** Entitlement subjects: at Key Stage 4, schools must offer students the chance to study for a qualification in at least one subject from four subject groups.[16]

**B** Basic curriculum subjects: not in the national curriculum but must be provided by schools. Parents and carers have the right to withdraw their child from some of these subjects.

**+** EBacc subjects.

As stated in the statutory national curriculum framework, the national curriculum 'is just one element in the education of every child' and it is intended that there is 'time and space in the school day and in each week, term and year to range beyond the national curriculum specifications'.[17] The national curriculum sets out the Programmes of Study but it does not specify the amount of time that schools should teach each subject. Whilst the amount of time spent on different national curriculum subjects varies across the key stages, a strong focus on English and Maths is maintained across all key stages, reflecting the importance of good literacy and numeracy for learning and wider outcomes.[18]

For academies, although their curriculum must be 'broad and balanced', they do not currently have to follow the national curriculum. However, the Government's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill[19] contains a provision to require academies to teach the national curriculum. Academies' funding agreements stipulate the teaching of English, Maths and Science, as well as the basic curriculum subjects of RHE, RSHE and RE. They are, however, like any state-funded schools, subject to inspection by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in relation to the intent, implementation and impact of their curriculum, which must be 'at least as ambitious in breadth and depth as the national curriculum'.[20]

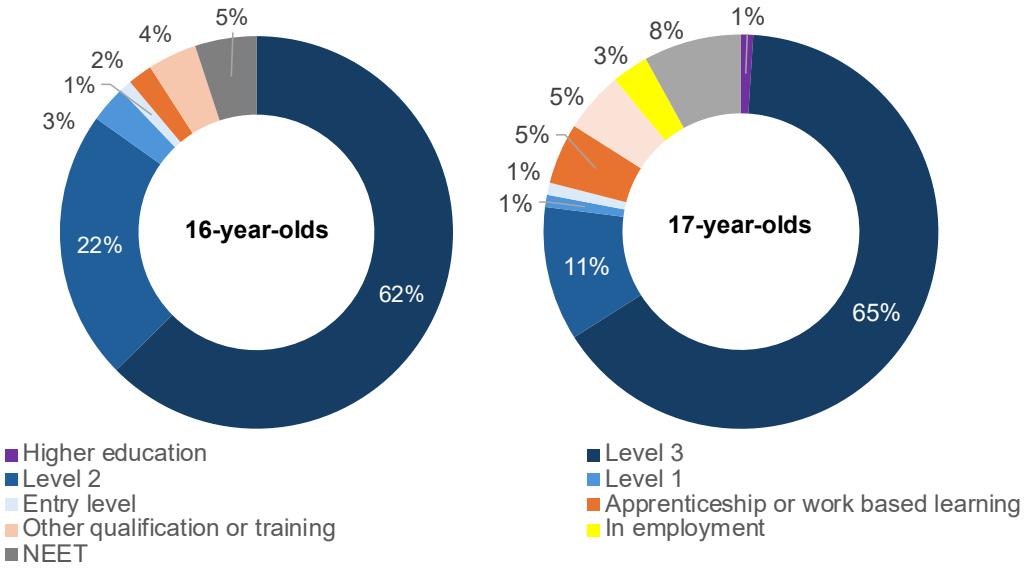
[15] Primary schools must provide Relationships and Health Education (RHE), and secondary schools must provide Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE).
[16] Arts (Art and Design, Music, Dance, Drama and Media Arts), Design and Technology, the Humanities (Geography and History) and MFL.
[17] National curriculum in England: framework for key stages 1 to 4 - GOV.UK
[18] In primary, the DfE's School snapshot survey: summer 2018, the NEU's Primary Curriculum Survey (2024) and responses to the Call for Evidence indicate a strong focus on English and Maths. At Key Stages 3 and 4, Teacher workforce data shows that English and Maths occupy a large proportion of teaching time.
[19] UK Parliament (2024) - Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill
[20] Ofsted recently updated its Education inspection framework, which will be used from 10 November 2025. This includes updated inspection toolkits, operating guides and information.

The current national curriculum framework makes it clear that, with effective planning for pupils with SEND, 'in many cases such planning will mean that pupils will be able to study the full curriculum'. For some pupils, including in education settings such as special schools and alternative provision, the curriculum may need significant appropriate adaptation to meet individual needs. The Special Education Needs (SEN) Code of Practice also states that schools should set out 'details of how the curriculum is adapted or made accessible for pupils with SEN'. Where pupils have Education, Health and Care Plans, these should also detail 'any appropriate modifications to the application of the National Curriculum'.

## 16-19 qualifications and programmes

16-19 study programmes[21] are designed to be flexible and tailored to individual needs, abilities and career goals, with learners able to pursue various 16-19 qualifications at different levels, including A Levels, Applied General Qualifications (AGQs), T Levels, Tech Levels, Technical Certificates and other vocational qualifications.

**Figure 2. Participation in education, training and employment aged 16 and 17 in England, 2024 [22]**




Nearly two-thirds (62%) of young people start their 16-19 education studying towards a level 3 qualification, 22% a level 2 qualification and 4% a qualification at level 1 or below. However, this changes over the course of 16-19 studies, with some students advancing in their levels of study or leaving education to join the labour market.

[21] DfE (2025) - 16 to 19 study programmes guidance: 2025 to 2026 academic year
[22] DfE (2024) - Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18, calendar year 2024

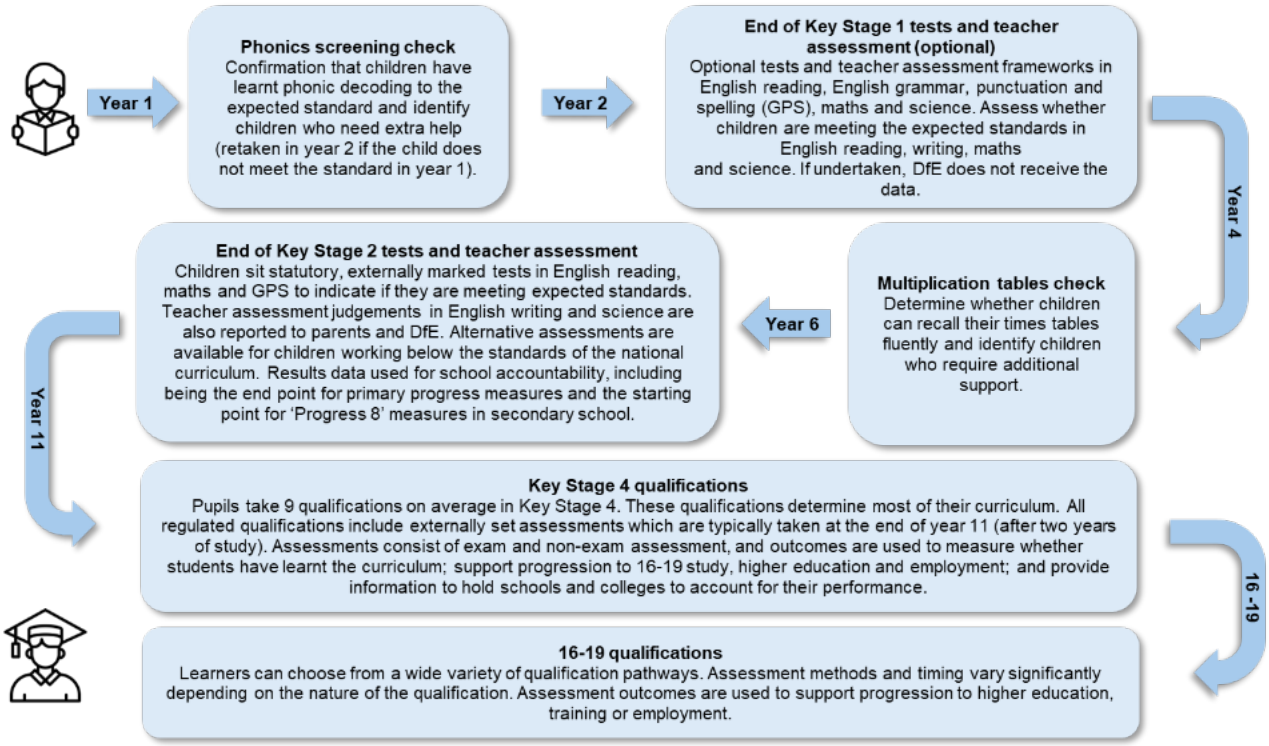
A Level learners represent the largest group at level 3 (34% of 16-year-olds), with an additional 10% combining A Levels with AGQs as part of a mixed programme. T Level learners currently represent only a small proportion of the cohort (3%),[23] with a much larger share (15%) working towards other level 3 qualifications (e.g. AGQs and Tech Levels).

For 16-19 learners who study a level 2 programme, many study towards GCSEs, either as their only level 2 qualifications (8% of 16-year-olds) or, more commonly, in combination with other types of level 2 qualifications, such as Technical Certificates (10% taking GCSEs and other level 2; 4% taking other level 2 only). These qualifications are supplemented by other non-qualification activities which can be used to broaden a learner's experience.[24]

## Assessment and accountability

Figure 3 shows the range of assessments in England from Key Stage 1 to 16-19.[25]

**Figure 3. National assessments and exams in England's education system**




[23] T Levels were launched in September 2020 and take-up has been increasing each year since. Source: Extract from DfE (2024) - Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18

[24] Non qualification activities include mentoring and coaching, certificates such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, work placement or experience and work-related activities like preparing CVs and practising interview skills and techniques, as well as personal and social development enrichment activities.

[25] The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is out of scope of this Review. During the EYFS, there are also statutory requirements for schools to complete the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) and the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) for each child.

In primary, statutory assessments (Phonics Screening Check, Multiplication Tables Check and Key Stage 2 assessments) and non-statutory tests (Key Stage 1 tests) focus on English and Maths.[26] These assessments are taken to inform pupil attainment and progress, and, in the case of Key Stage 2 assessment, inform accountability measures.

Learners take national exams at the end of Key Stage 4 and in their 16-19 studies. At Key Stage 4 they take GCSEs and may also take Technical Awards, and in 16-19 education learners can choose from a range of academic qualifications (e.g. A Levels) and technical qualifications (e.g. T Levels, AGQs and Tech Levels) at different levels. These various qualifications are delivered by exam boards and awarding organisations which are independently regulated by Ofqual. Take up for different subjects changes over time, illustration of these trends is available here.[27]

National assessments and qualifications in England are linked to accountability measures. For example, qualifications at the end of Key Stage 4 are linked to performance measures such as the EBacc, Attainment 8 and Progress 8. Performance measures are typically used to measure the attainment, progress and/or destinations of learners. A list of performance measures across key stages can be found at Annex 1, which also includes an explanation of the subjects included in the EBacc measure.

[26] National curriculum assessments in primary schools are developed and delivered by the Standards and Testing Agency (STA), an executive agency of the DfE, and the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) has a regulatory responsibility for these assessments.
[27] Curriculum and Assessment Review - Department for Education - Citizen Space

# Towards a world-leading curriculum

## What is going well and should be maintained

Our present national curriculum provides a knowledge-rich offer, and international comparisons suggest that the present arrangements have had a positive impact on attainment. This builds on the commitment to high standards and the hard work of education professionals to realise improvement across the last quarter century. Despite disruption from the pandemic, England continues to show comparatively strong educational outcomes in international assessments:[28]

- England's Year 5 pupils continue to perform significantly better than the international average in reading.[29]
- For Year 5 and Year 9 pupils, there have been significant improvements in performance in Science between 2019 and 2023, with Maths performance remaining stable over the same period.[30]
- England's 15-year-olds continue to perform above the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average in reading, Maths and Science.[31]
- England's 16- to 19-year-olds scored substantially better than the OECD average in literacy and adaptive problem solving (and similar to the OECD average in numeracy) in the 2023 OECD international Survey of Adult Skills, having made significant improvements in literacy and numeracy since 2012.[32]

Of course, in some areas England's performance has nevertheless fallen over time (especially during the pandemic), and as we shall discuss, there remain significant gaps according to social background, different levels of prior attainment and so on. Nevertheless, these outcomes provide a reasonably positive comparative picture.

Subjects in England's national curriculum are broadly in line with subjects studied in other OECD countries, including high-performing jurisdictions.[33] Likewise, national assessments and exams in both primary and secondary are common in most OECD countries. They are intended to provide a range of functions, including diagnostic information for teachers, monitor the education system, evaluate school performance,

[28] We recognise the various methodological complexities and limitations of international comparisons and resulting caveats. We also recognise that, in some cases, England's performance has fallen, for example, for England's 15-year-olds, performance Reading and maths have declined since 2018 and whilst performance in Science remained stable compared to 2018, it has declined compared to previous years. Nevertheless these outcomes provide a positive comparative picture.
[29] DfE - PIRLS 2021: National Report for England
[30] DfE - Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2023: National report for England Volume 1
[31] DfE - PISA 2022: national report for England
[32] DfE - Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (PIAAC): national report for England
[33] OECD (2023) - Education at a Glance 2023 (see table D1.3 for primary and D1.4 for lower secondary)

provide formative feedback for parents and carers, and support students' progression to tertiary education.[34]

There is much to celebrate in the current national curriculum. The breadth of subjects taught across Key Stages 1 to 4 has enabled children and young people to develop knowledge and skills across a wide spectrum. Responses to our Call for Evidence highlighted the value of this breadth, with stakeholders noting that it supports well-rounded development and offers multiple pathways for children and young people to achieve and thrive. In 2023/24, 89% of state-funded students studied eight or more qualifications at Key Stage 4, with the most common number being nine.[35] Polling also suggests that the majority of Key Stage 4 students (76%) were able to study the subjects they wanted, reflecting a curriculum that provides access and choice for many.[36]

We strongly affirm the value of all the subjects in the national curriculum and basic curriculum. Each plays a vital role in equipping children and young people with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate the world, while engaging and contributing to our society and culture, and pursuing their individual aspirations. Whether academic, creative, vocational or physical, every subject contributes to a rich and balanced education. Our recommendations build on the knowledge-rich approach and on the coherent structural architecture established by the previous Review.[37]

The current subject architecture provides a strong foundation, introduces subjects to young people at the appropriate stage, and allows them to pursue their interests once they have experienced the full range of subjects. Therefore, we recommend only minor amendments to the existing subject structure, ensuring continuity and stability whilst improving curriculum content and delivery. Our subject-level recommendations seek to support each of these subjects to flourish, while our recommendations on performance measures aim to balance breadth with flexibility and choice.

We also value the holistic ethos of Key Stage 1 and broader primary education. Here, learning and social behaviours are developed, literacy and numeracy skills are established, and other subjects are introduced, encouraging a love of learning and enabling success. Children and their parents and carers tend to be happy with their primary education, and it is important we preserve this.[38] We consider that the present architecture of key stages is functioning effectively overall, and we propose its retention

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[34] OECD (2013) - Synergies for Better Learning;
OECD (2023) - Education at a Glance 2023: What assessments and examinations of students are in place?
Suto, I., Oates, T. (2021) - High-stakes testing after basic secondary education: How and why is it done in high-performing education systems?

[35] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)

[36] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Polling of Key Stage 4 and 16-19 learners and parents)

[37] DfE (2011) - Framework for the national curriculum

[38] Parentkind (2024) - The National Parent Survey 2024 – the underlying data shows that 81% of parents with primary school aged children are happy with the education their children receive from their schools

(see our view of the key stages). Likewise, our national assessments and qualifications are broadly working well, including the Phonics Screening Check, the Multiplication Tables Check, national tests at the end of Key Stage 2, GCSEs and Key Stage 4 Technical Awards, A Levels and T Levels.[39]

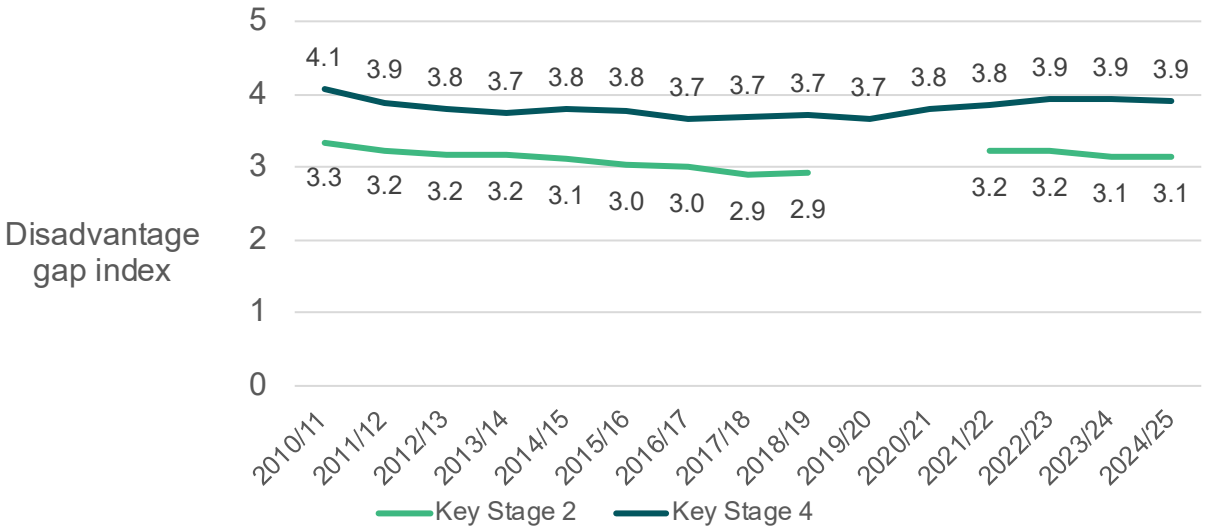
Despite the strengths of our current system, our analysis has identified many areas that require attention. There are clear opportunities for improvement in curriculum and assessment across both primary and secondary education, as well as more substantial reform of 16-19 qualifications. The remaining sections of this report set out the key challenges and present targeted recommendations, with the aim of beneficial and lasting improvement across the education system.

## ‘High standards’ must mean high standards for all

A world-leading education system must deliver excellence for all young people, irrespective of background. Our curriculum and assessment system is working well in many respects, but it is not delivering high standards for all, and some gaps are widening rather than narrowing. In particular, a stubborn attainment gap remains between those that are socio-economically disadvantaged and their peers (Figure 4), while children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) make less progress in comparison to those without SEND.[40]

[39] EYFS and reception baseline assessment are out of scope of the Review.
[40] See ‘Attainment and progress by pupil characteristics’ in DfE (2023) - Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2022/23; DfE (2025) - Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2024/25 – please note: Key Stage 2 progress scores were not published in 2023/24 and 2024/25 due to COVID-19; See disadvantage gap index and Progress 8 measure in DfE (2025) - Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25

**Figure 4. Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 disadvantage gap index**




For socio-economically disadvantaged young people, slower progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 (as indicated by their Progress 8 scores) widens the attainment gap that already existed between these pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers at Key Stage 2, with a gap of 15 points in their Attainment 8 scores broadly equivalent to one and half a grades per subject (Table 1).

**Table 1. Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 attainment and progress, by disadvantage status (2024/25, unless stated otherwise)[41]**

| | All pupils | Disadvantaged | Not disadvantaged |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Key Stage 2 - % achieving the expected standards in:** | | | |
| Reading | 75 | 63 | 81 |
| Writing | 72 | 59 | 78 |
| Maths | 74 | 61 | 80 |
| Reading, Writing and Maths | 62 | 47 | 69 |
| **Key Stage 4** | | | |
| Average Attainment 8 score | 45.9 | 34.9 | 50.3 |
| Average Progress 8 score (2023/24)[42] | -0.03 | -0.57 | 0.16 |

[41] DfE (2025) - Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25

[42] Progress 8 is not being published in 2024/25 as Key Stage 4 pupils in this year did not have their Key Stage 2 assessments due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pupils with SEND also make less progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 compared with those without identified SEND, again widening the attainment gap that already existed at Key Stage 2.[43] These progress gaps are deeply concerning in a society that promotes equality of opportunity for all.

**Table 2. Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 attainment and progress, by SEN status (2024/25, unless stated otherwise)[44]**

| | All pupils | SEN | No identified SEN |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Key Stage 2 - % achieving the expected standards in:** | | | |
| Reading | 75 | 42 | 85 |
| Writing | 72 | 32 | 84 |
| Maths | 74 | 40 | 84 |
| Reading, Writing and Maths | 62 | 24 | 74 |
| **Key Stage 4** | | | |
| Average Attainment 8 score | 45.9 | 28.1 | 50.1 |
| Average Progress 8 score (2023/24) | -0.03 | -0.63 | 0.10 |

We recognise these inequalities exist alongside, and intersect with, other factors (including ethnicity, sex[45] and geographical location), which result in poorer outcomes for particular groups - either generally or for specific subjects. For example, girls' attainment in the expected standards in the Key Stage 2 writing assessment is 12 percentage points higher than boys'. This gap is even wider when comparing socio-economically disadvantaged pupils with their peers (a gap of 19 percentage points). For both boys and girls, disadvantaged Gypsy and Irish Traveller have some of the lowest Key Stage 2 writing outcomes, as have disadvantaged white and Black Caribbean-heritage boys.[46] Writing gaps therefore vary according to a range of characteristics. Some of these inequalities extend across subjects, both in terms of uptake and attainment. At Key Stage 4, rates of uptake differ across most non-core

[43] Slower progress is common across pupils with all types of SEND irrespective of prior attainment. Those with hearing impairments, visual impairments, and other physical disabilities are more likely to meet the expected standards at Key Stage 2 and have higher attainment at Key Stage 4 than those with speech, language or communication needs or autistic spectrum condition. Extract from DfE (2025) - Key Stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2024/25; Extract from DfE (2024) - Key Stage 4 performance, Academic year 2023/24. Note that within these statistical publications, autistic spectrum conditions are referred to as autistic spectrum disorder.

[44] DfE (2025) - Key Stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Key Stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25; Progress 8 is not being published in 2024/25 as Key Stage 4 pupils in this year did not have their Key Stage 2 assessments due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[45] The Department does not collect statistics on gender identity.

[46] DfE (2025) - Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2024/25

subjects, depending on factors such as protected characteristics, special educational needs and socio-economic status. For example, students from disadvantaged backgrounds or who have an identified SEND are much less likely to take a GCSE in a Modern Foreign Language compared with their peers, with 16 and 32 percentage point gaps respectively; and girls are much less likely to take Computer Science compared to boys, with boys being over three and a half times more likely to take the GCSE than girls.[47] Evidence also shows that disadvantaged young people tend to have less access to a broad curriculum, in both primary and secondary.[48]

Many explanations for the relative lack of progress for socio-economically disadvantaged children and young people and those with SEND lie beyond the curriculum. Most of the variation in outcomes stem from factors outside of school (for example, child poverty). Other sources of variation include educational factors such as pedagogy, school approaches and resources.[49] These factors are outside the scope of this Review. However, a well-structured and refreshed curriculum can still make a difference. When the curriculum is designed thoughtfully, it can reduce unnecessary inequities and barriers to learning, provide clarity and coherence for teachers, and better support young people with diverse needs.[50]

## A commitment to social justice

We think every child is entitled to high standards, including a rich curriculum that articulates what they should learn, and reliable assessments that support their learning and capture their achievements. An excellent national curriculum and a high-quality assessment and qualifications system are fundamental to achieving these ends.

As set out in the Terms of Reference, the Review has a commitment to 'Remediate existing blocks to progress and good outcomes, with an especial concern for equity and ensuring positive outcomes for children and young people who are from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, have a special education need (SEN) or disability and/or are otherwise vulnerable'. We have applied a social justice lens to all aspects of our work, seeking to identify and remove barriers to progress within the curriculum and assessment system. In doing this we recognise that young people from both socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEND are not generalised groups. They contain individuals with a wide range of prior attainment and characteristics, strengths, interests, barriers to learning, and needs regarding the curriculum.

[47] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[48] EPI (2018) - Key drivers of the disadvantage gap - Literature Review; Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[49] DfE (2024) - Factors influencing primary school pupils' educational outcomes; DfE (2024) - Factors influencing secondary school pupils' educational outcomes
[50] Luke, A., Woods, A. and Weir, K. (2012) - Curriculum, Syllabus Design and Equity

Throughout the Review, we have recognised the wider policy landscape and Government activity, considering our recommendations alongside the work of Dame Christine Lenehan, the DfE's strategic adviser on SEND, Tom Rees, Chair of the Expert Advisory Group for Inclusion (EAG), and Professor Karen Guldberg, Chair of the Neurodivergence task and finish group.

Promoting social justice brings with it a variety of dilemmas. The Review has faced the challenge of balancing our unequivocal commitment to high aspirations for all, while simultaneously providing the necessary flexibility to address young people's diverse needs. On many occasions, the Review Panel heard convincing evidence of issues about inclusivity, yet further consideration revealed that potential solutions risk greater harms and inequities than the existing problem. An example is aspects of assessment, where the negative consequences of marking out some young people as underachieving must be balanced with the requirement for formative analysis, which is crucial for supporting further progress for individuals and benchmarking standards. A further area where this dilemma presents itself is performance measures, where incentivising particular behaviours may be beneficial but also have unintended consequences.

Nevertheless, we have sought to make recommendations in many areas that will improve progress for groups disadvantaged in the present system, and where improvements to curriculum and assessment may contribute to narrowing gaps. The remainder of this section outlines several overarching recommendations designed to benefit all young people, but which are likely to be most beneficial to young people struggling with or disaffected from their learning, among whom those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEND are overrepresented. We have also made recommendations relating to specific subject areas that aim to support social justice and inclusion. These are detailed in the subject sections.

## A high-quality and inclusive curriculum for all

Although a well-designed curriculum is important for all young people, it is particularly beneficial for those with SEND and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. They suffer disproportionately when the curriculum is poorly articulated, overloaded, badly organised or depends on experiences outside the classroom.
By ensuring that the volume of content in the national curriculum is appropriate for the teaching time that is available, we aim to give schools sufficient time to consolidate learning, as well as the space to provide the enrichment activities and life skills that prepare young people for life and work. This is important for enabling an accessible and inclusive school curriculum, and also to support engagement, particularly for secondary students. Evidence shows that there is a substantial drop in pupil engagement and views on the value of education as they transition from primary education, especially for those

from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.[51] In our chapter on curriculum principles, we therefore set out recommendations to improve the clarity, specificity and sequencing of the curriculum, ensuring space for mastery of core concepts (see curriculum principles). Of course, curriculum design is just one step in an inclusive learning experience. Adaptive teaching practices, teachers' expertise, the engagement of parents and carers, the role of support staff and the classroom environment are examples of factors that also contribute to truly inclusive education.

Access to the national curriculum should remain an expectation and an entitlement for all children and young people, including those in specialist and alternative provision. However, the Review acknowledges the ongoing need for the national curriculum to be appropriately adapted (and in certain cases in specialist settings, disapplied) to meet the specific needs of young people. It is therefore important that specialist, alternative and other education settings retain their freedom to adapt the national curriculum as appropriate, and that they are supported to be appropriately ambitious for pupils in how they use these freedoms. Therefore, as well as providing principles to support the refreshed drafting of the national curriculum, we make recommendations to foreground the role of wider guidance and exemplification to support practitioners, across all settings, to adapt the national curriculum where required (see the national curriculum as a tool for teachers).

To better support high aspiration and success for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and to ensure young people have the same opportunities to achieve and thrive, we are making a series of subject-specific recommendations where the design of the curriculum itself may be creating barriers to learning. In some cases, structural issues within the curriculum can unintentionally limit access or disadvantage certain groups.[52] These are explored in more detail in the subject-specific sub-sections (see curriculum recommendations by subject).

Young people need to access an ambitious, broad and balanced curriculum that supports life chances, irrespective of background. To avoid their engagement or outcomes being unintentionally impeded, they also need access to subjects that best meet their individual interests and pathways. We need to strike the right balance between offering young people choices that allow them to follow their interests or pursue a particular future path, and making sure every young person has access to a broad and balanced curriculum that does not close off avenues. And we must particularly avoid facilitating trends for young people from some backgrounds to take routes that are narrower or less demanding. Our assessment of the evidence suggests that the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measures - whilst well-intentioned - have not achieved this

[51] Jerrim, J. (2025) – Mind the Engagement Gap: A National Study of Pupil Engagement in England's Schools; Jerrim, J. (2025) - How engaged are low-income White children during secondary school?
[52] For example, access to GCSE Triple Science is not universal, which can restrict opportunities for some pupils wishing to pursue Science further. Similarly, high attainment in GCSE Music often depends on access to extra-curricular tutoring, which is not equally available to all students.

balance. Our recommendations on performance measures seek to do so, by removing the EBacc measures, whilst retaining an 'Academic Breadth' bucket within the Progress 8 measure to maintain its various benefits (see accountability and performance measures).

In addition, the assessment and qualification system must be inclusive and accessible so that all young people are able to demonstrate their learning. Our assessment recommendations emphasise the importance of embedding accessibility into the design of new specifications. This includes careful consideration of how subject content interacts with assessment methods, and the broader implications for teaching and learning for all groups of students, including pupils with SEND (see assessment).

## Smooth transitions that support progress

Many factors contribute to the large attainment gaps for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEND. Two curriculum-related problems are the transition between primary and secondary school and insecure core knowledge and skills at this critical juncture.

Strong teaching and a well-designed curriculum in the primary phase both play a vital role in establishing foundational knowledge in English and Maths. However, not all pupils complete Key Stage 2 with the secure foundations needed for confident progression. Students entering Key Stage 3 without these strong foundations often struggle to build momentum in their learning. Instead of progressing confidently, many begin to fall further behind. This highlights the need for coherence, responsiveness and effective support at the point of transition.[53] Other factors in Key Stage 3 compound this, such as the challenge for pupils to adapt to a larger school community and multiple teachers, and the tendency for the strongest teachers to be deployed in Key Stage 4.[54] Our recommendations to improve curriculum coherence, to make better use of data from Key Stage 2 assessments, and to transform the national curriculum into a digital tool that enables teachers to easily see links between phases and subject, should facilitate this more effective support across transitions.

Securing level 2 in Maths and English by the age of 16 has a strong impact on young people's life chances.[55] Yet too many struggle to achieve this, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds or those with SEND. We believe that far more are capable of reaching level 2 in English and Maths than - despite 12 years of schooling - do currently. It is imperative that we narrow this gap.

Therefore, in addition to making recommendations to improve the Maths and English curriculum, we recommend the development of a diagnostic (formative) test in Maths and

[53] DfE (2024) - Factors influencing secondary school pupils' educational outcomes
[54] Ofsted (2015) - Key stage 3: the wasted years?
[55] Department for Business Innovation & Skills (2016) - Further education qualifications in maths and English: returns and benefits - GOV.UK

English in Key Stage 3 (see curriculum recommendations by subject and Key Stage 3 assessment). Evidence shows that formative assessments are an effective tool in raising attainment.[56] This would support teachers in identifying and addressing gaps in knowledge during Key Stage 3 at an earlier stage, ensuring more students are supported to progress successfully into Key Stage 4.

## High-quality pathways for all learners

Given the importance of level 3 learning and qualifications in shaping life chances and supporting our economy, and recognising the longstanding complexity and inconsistency in this area, we make recommendations to establish clear, high-quality pathways at level 3. We also recommend that the Government introduces a revised third pathway with a streamlined qualification offer at level 3, to sit alongside the academic and technical pathways. This pathway should provide an aspirational alternative to A Levels and T Levels and should be based on new vocational qualifications, which we recommend calling V Levels. This should also support the significant proportion of young people for whom these former routes are not suitable to pursue high-quality and rewarding level 3 study. This group disproportionately includes those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEND.[57]

Our recommendations focused on level 2 pathways at 16-19 seek to support all young people to pursue high-quality routes into occupations or further study, reflecting the Review's approach to improving social justice. Strengthened level 2 pathways will provide ambitious and clear opportunities for learners, especially benefitting those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEND.

Finally, we make recommendations to support greater efficacy in the provision of Maths and English at 16-19 to help those young people who do not secure a level 2 qualification by 16 to achieve this at 16-19. This recommendation supports low prior attainers, among whom young people from socio-economically disadvantaged and those with SEND are over-represented (see 16-19 Maths and English).

## A curriculum that reflects our society

The national curriculum is for all our young people. Our diversity and commitment to equality of opportunity and fairness are some of this country's greatest strengths. Throughout the Review we are seeking to deliver a curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring all children and young people are represented,[58] whilst also exposing them to a wide range of perspectives that broaden their horizons.

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[56] OECD (2005) - Formative Assessment | OECD; EEF (2021) – Feedback; Baird, J., Andrich, D., Hopfenbeck, T. & Stobart, G. (2017) - Assessment and learning: fields apart?; Kingston, N. & Nash, B. (2011) - Formative Assessment: A Meta-Analysis and a Call for Research

[57] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)

[58] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Set-up

Our recommendations seek to ensure that all young people feel included in and engaged by the national curriculum.

The national curriculum already offers teachers scope to create inclusive learning experiences by weaving together topics and themes and drawing on case studies and exemplars. Often what is needed is greater exemplification and access to high-quality resources that support this work - including local exemplification that brings the curriculum to life. However, we have heard compelling arguments, some directly from young people in our roundtables, that the curriculum needs to reflect society, support equality of opportunity, and challenge discrimination.

Young people have told us that not seeing themselves in the curriculum, or encountering negative portrayals, can be disempowering and demotivating, a point supported by wider evidence.[59] To foster engagement and support positive outcomes, it's important that the curriculum covers a wide range of experiences and representation, as well as promoting our shared values, to build empathy and understanding of others.[60]

Representation must go hand in hand with broadening horizons; it should not mean limiting children and young people to narrow frames of reference based on their background. Inclusion is also fostered through shared experiences, creating connections and opportunities to explore a wide range of viewpoints. As such, mutual access to core knowledge, and curriculum coherence, efficacy and breadth for all children should remain central as we work to ensure the curriculum is more broadly representative. With this in mind, we make an overarching recommendation that the curriculum reforms should be guided by the principle that they reflect the diversity of our society and the contributions that have shaped it (see a curriculum for all).

[59] The Centre for Education and Youth [formerly LKMco] (2018) - 'Boys on Track': Improving support for white FSM-eligible and black Caribbean boys in London - CfEY

[60] Elliott, V., Nelson-Addy, L., Chantiluke, R. & Courtney, M. (2021) - Lit in Colour: Diversity in literature in English Schools; Sleeter, E. & Zavala, M. (2020) - What the Research Says About Ethnic Studies

## Preparing learners for a changing world

Our curriculum must equip young people for a world that is changing quickly. Rapid technological advancements, including the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), are likely to significantly change the way we work. The climate crisis brings wide-ranging, urgent challenges to address - but also opportunities to seize, as we seek to restore our environment. Global geo-politics and means of communication are also shifting. New media channels are enabling greater connectivity than ever before, whilst amplifying the risks posed by online harms or misinformation.

Subject-specific knowledge remains the best investment in preparing young people for these challenges and opportunities: Science and Maths will remain crucial, as will an understanding of communication and culture, through the humanities, languages, and the arts. But the curriculum also needs to adapt to ensure that young people have the requisite knowledge and skills to shape our changing social and physical environment.

Through responses to our Call for Evidence, our review of existing research and our public engagement and polling, the Review has heard repeated concerns that certain areas of applied knowledge and skills require more attention within the curriculum. Many areas have been raised, including those that fall beyond our Terms of Reference (such as careers education). Five areas have received the most attention from young people, parents and carers, and other stakeholders. These are the applied knowledge areas (frequently referred to as 'life skills') of financial literacy, digital literacy and media literacy; education on climate change and sustainability; and the skill of oracy. Young people also raised political knowledge frequently; this is addressed in our recommendations in Citizenship.

We have reviewed where these applied knowledge areas already exist in the national curriculum and indicated where that provision should be updated or strengthened, setting out where gaps need addressing. We have also looked at non-qualification activity as part of 16-19 study programmes. While individual recommendations for the five areas are set out in greater detail in the subject-specific sections, our high-level findings are set out below.

### Financial education

Financial education includes understanding core financial concepts such as budgeting, debt, interest, mortgages and pensions, alongside an awareness of how mathematical concepts can be applied to real-world scenarios. Greater financial literacy, which is a consequence of a suitable financial education, can bring benefits to both individuals and

to the economy,[61] while lower levels of financial literacy can leave individuals less able to manage their finances effectively on a day-to-day basis or plan for the future.[62]

Financial education should not be delayed until later life. Research shows that children's habits and attitudes towards money develop at an early age, including their disposition to spend or save, and this underpins their financial capability in adulthood.[63] At this critical time in their development, children are also increasingly making digital financial transactions themselves, with the majority of 7 to 17-year-olds (71%) making online purchases; of those who have bought online, two-thirds (67%) have done so without adult supervision.[64] Young people may also have to make significant financial decisions early on, such as deciding whether or not to apply for tuition fee loans for higher education. In addition, the likelihood that children and young people receive meaningful financial education at home varies according to their background.[65] Given these disparities, it is therefore vital that the curriculum provides young people with appropriate financial education from an early age.

In 2014, financial education was made compulsory in the Citizenship curriculum for 11 to 16-year-olds. Young people also receive some limited financial education through the Maths curriculum. In primary, the Maths curriculum promotes the use of financial contexts, while in secondary it requires some exemplification of using mathematical knowledge to interpret and solve problems. At 16-19, some providers typically offer learners support with career planning and financial education as part of non-qualification activity, alongside their substantive qualifications.

Despite this, evidence suggests that, in practice, the financial education content which already exists in the national curriculum is not always taught, with only a third (33%) of children able to recall learning about money in school and finding it useful.[66] As a result, many young people are leaving education with low levels of financial capability.[67] The Review has consistently heard that children and young people would like more financial education at school, and this is supported by polling of young people and parents and

[61] Research by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) suggested that greater financial literacy could add an additional £7 billion to the UK economy each year by boosting entrepreneurship and business formation, creating up to 123,000 jobs annually: CBI Economics (2022) - Paving the way to financial wellbeing
[62] Money Advice Service (now part of Money & Pensions Service) (2018) - Financial Capability Survey, 2018
[63] Money & Pensions Service (2023) - Developing children and young people's financial capability
[64] Money & Pensions Service (2024) - Literature Review: The impact of digital money on children and young people's financial education | Money and Pensions Service
[65] Money & Pensions Service (2023) - UK Children and Young People's Financial Wellbeing Survey: Financial Foundations
[66] Money & Pensions Service (2023) - UK Children and Young People's Financial Wellbeing Survey: Financial Foundations; Over half (54%) of Year 7 to 11 pupils stated that they had been taught topics related to money since the start of secondary school: Parent, pupil and learner voice: omnibus surveys for 2024 to 2025 - GOV.UK (December 2024)
[67] Money & Pensions Service - Hundreds of thousands of young people leaving school every year without money skills

carers. Nearly half (48%) of parent respondents to the National Parent Survey said that too little time is spent on financial management skills,[68] whilst finance and budgeting was the most commonly selected area cited for greater focus in the Review's polling.[69]

Whilst the Review recognises the importance of building a strong foundation in numeracy for developing financial literacy, we have heard from stakeholders and learners that financial education's main 'home' should not be in Maths.[70] Because financial education incorporates more applied concepts (such as how to manage money well, how to budget and how to use financial products), the Review recommends greater application of such concepts in the Citizenship Programme of Study. However, there are interdependencies between Maths and Citizenship. We therefore recommend that mathematical concepts relevant to financial education should be introduced in Maths before students are exposed to them in other subjects. For example, before the topic of compound interest arises in financial education, students should have first learnt about percentages in Maths. This would provide the foundational knowledge required before studying loans in Citizenship. The Citizenship and Maths Programmes of Study should reflect this through coherent sequencing.

To ensure that all children have access to financial education and other critical elements of the Citizenship curriculum within primary education onwards, we recommend making Citizenship (including the financial education elements) part of the national curriculum at Key Stages 1 and 2 (see Citizenship). We also note the value of further exemplifying the effective teaching of financial literacy, through resources such as those created by Oak National Academy.[71]

At 16-19, we heard positive examples of developing financial literacy as part of the non-qualification activity element of learners' study programmes, including initiatives delivered in collaboration with employers. Good practice like this should be encouraged, and our assessment of the evidence and recommendations for non-qualification activity at 16-19 are set out in more detail (see 16-19 non-qualification activity).

## Digital literacy

Digital literacy encompasses the knowledge, behaviours and confidence required to use technologies and computer systems creatively, safely and effectively. It also involves the ability to make well-informed critical judgements about the implications, risks and impact

[68] Parentkind (2024) - The National Parent Survey 2024
[69] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Polling of key stage 4 and 16-19 learners and parents)
[70] Two thirds (65-67%) of 11 to 18-year-olds indicated that they would prefer financial literacy to be taught outside of Maths. Source: Maths Horizons (2025) - Financial literacy report
[71] Oak National Academy (2025) - Free Key Stage 3 Financial education teaching resources

of how digital technology is used.[72] Being digitally literate empowers children and young people to adapt and thrive in a technology-driven world, use technology safely, and fully engage with learning across the whole curriculum.

Currently, digital literacy is predominantly located within the Computing curriculum which comprises Computer Science (50%), Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (25%) and digital literacy (25%). As set out elsewhere, there is scope to refine the Computing curriculum to better reflect the knowledge and skills needed for everyday life, including commonly used technologies (see Computing). Elements of digital literacy also appear in other subjects. For example, Citizenship addresses misinformation and disinformation, while Relationships and Sex Education (RSHE) covers online safety, relationships and digital harms. Geography and Design and Technology incorporate digital tools such as Geographical Information Systems and 3-D modelling. At 16-19, learners may access enrichment activities that build digital confidence, although availability and support vary.

The Review's Call for Evidence and wider engagement highlights widespread concern that young people are not developing adequate digital literacy skills, which are essential both for everyday life and future employment. There are also significant concerns about the misuse of online technologies and its impact on young people's wellbeing.[73]

In our polling, 41% of students said they would like greater emphasis on digital skills or computing.[74] Stakeholders expressed concern about the lack of specificity around digital literacy within the curriculum, particularly in the Key Stage 4 Computing Programme of Study. We heard that this lack of clarity is leading to inconsistent practice.

A lack of digital literacy has a negative impact on the ability to safely use, and critically engage with, digital technology for personal and work-related purposes. Those who are digitally disengaged can struggle to navigate a digital society and access work opportunities. Evidence points to a growing but unmet demand for digital skills within the job market. For example, of vacancies reported to be a result of skills shortages, 29% relate to a lack of digital skills, including 17% that relate to a lack of advanced digital skills.[75] The assumption that young people will acquire digital literacy automatically is

[72] We use 'digital literacy' over 'digital skills' as literacy includes knowledge as well as skills. With rapid technological change, skills alone can date quickly. The knowledge that underpins these skills, such as how systems work, is therefore a vital component.
[73] Education Select Committee (2024) - Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing; Young Minds (2023) - Putting a stop to the endless scroll
[74] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Polling of key stage 4 and 16-19 learners and parents); DfE (2024) - Skills England report: driving growth and widening opportunities also reported that 'digital and computing occupations and were much more likely to be due to skills shortages (81%) than they were across all occupations (63%)'.
[75] EPI (2022) - Digital Skills Divided: Technical provision for 16 to 19-year-olds - Advanced digital skills refer to capabilities such as specialist hardware/software system knowledge, application programming, graphic design, data analysis and web development.

incorrect.[76] To prepare children and young people for life and work, the curriculum must offer more robust digital education.

Recent advancements in AI and generative AI have made digital literacy even more critical. While the long-term impact of AI remains uncertain, young people should understand how it works, its capabilities and its limitations. They should learn how to use AI effectively, without becoming dependent on it, and be engaged in the developing knowledge about both AI's strengths and limitations.[77] Currently the national curriculum contains limited references to AI, and we recommend this be addressed within the Computing curriculum (see Computing). We also recommend more frequent updates to the curriculum in subjects involving rapidly evolving digital technologies (see future curriculum reviews).

The Review identifies Computing as the primary subject to deliver digital literacy content and recommends that it provides greater clarity on what should be taught at each key stage. This will ensure students build essential digital competencies for life and work. This recommendation applies to all key stages but is particularly important at Key Stage 4, where the Computing Programme of Study presently consists of just three bullet points. We also recommend broadening the GCSE to incorporate the full breadth of the Computing curriculum. While other subjects should be enriched through the thoughtful use of digital technologies, such as using 3-D modelling in Design and Technology (D&T) and use of geographical information systems in Geography, the foundations must be developed through Computing.[78]

Responsible technology use and awareness of online harms and safety should be addressed in RSHE, where young people explore the social, emotional and ethical dimensions of digital life.[79] We also recommend that these topics be reinforced in Computing, given its central role in digital literacy. Critical evaluation of online content, essential for navigating misinformation and disinformation, should be covered in Citizenship (see also media literacy). To support teachers, optional resources are available from Oak National Academy and other providers. However, safeguarding young people in a digital world demands clear, consistent, and compulsory coverage across the curriculum.

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[76] Allmann, K. (2022) - UK Digital Poverty Evidence Review – Digital Poverty Alliance
[77] Christodoulou, D. (2025) - 'Are we living in a stupidogenic society?'
Yan, L., Greiff, S., Teuber, Z. & Gašavić, D. (2024) - Promises and challenges of generative artificial intelligence for human learning
UNESCO (2024) - Generative Artificial Intelligence in education: Think piece by Stefania Giannini
Ahmad, S., Heesup, H., Alam, M., Rehmat M., Irshad, M., Arraño-Muñoz, M. & Ariza-Montes, A. (2023) - Impact of artificial intelligence on human loss in decision making, laziness and safety in education
[78] As with other recommendations for Computing, the Review notes that wider challenges, for example, the sufficiency of school infrastructure and access to technologies, will need to be considered in implementing our recommendations.
[79] Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education guidance

## Media literacy

The Review considers media literacy to involve understanding and engaging critically with the messages conveyed through different media channels, including AI. This includes understanding how to identify and protect against misinformation and disinformation by questioning and applying critical enquiry to information and information sources. Having secure knowledge is essential to discerning truth from falsehoods and is one of the many reasons why a knowledge-rich curriculum is more, not less important in the modern world. In addition, it is important that learners utilise the processes of investigating sources, weighing evidence and applying an informed critical lens. This is essential in a world where misinformation is prevalent, and facts are increasingly disputed.

Misinformation and disinformation can take many forms, including scientific (as in the case of anti-vaccine campaigns or climate change denial), political (as in the case of deepfake content of political figures or wider misrepresentation of current or historical events) or more general (such as the prevalence of unverified claims online). Research has shown this is a growing concern for young people, as well as for teachers and parents and carers. Over half of young people reported that they have encountered someone in their class (51%) or on social media (52%) who believes in a conspiracy theory and almost half of teachers (49%) reported they are at least moderately worried about a pupil expressing a belief in a conspiracy to them in the classroom.[80] Ofcom has observed reduced confidence among young people in identifying fake online content,[81] and 42% of parents of Year 6 pupils are not confident that their child is being taught in school how to fact-check media.[82] As such, building media literacy is crucial to equip children and young people with the necessary tools to critically appraise and engage with media in all its forms. We recognise the important links to some elements of digital literacy, particularly when dealing with misinformation and disinformation online.

Some subjects, such as History and Science, already support the development of the critical analysis which underpins media literacy. In History, students learn (through the process of historical analysis) to assess separate information sources while accounting for biases, reliability, perspective and inaccuracies. In Science, students are similarly taught to critically and empirically evaluate scientific claims. These processes are essential for encouraging the investigative process which underpins media literacy and teachers should be encouraged to make these links.

[80] Public First (2025) - Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools
[81] Ofcom (2025) - Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2025. Misinformation and disinformation have resulted in less than half of UK adults (45%) feeling confident that they can judge whether sources of information are truthful (Ofcom (2024) - Understanding misinformation: an exploration of UK adults' behaviour and attitudes).
[82] DfE (2023) - Parent, pupil and learner panel omnibus surveys for 2022 to 2023 - Parent, pupil and learner panel: 22/23 March/April wave

The national curriculum also has some direct media literacy coverage in Citizenship (Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4), RSHE, Computing and English, and in the optional GCSE Media Studies. Together, these subjects aim to equip children and young people with the knowledge and skills required to become discerning consumers of media[83] and to use information and communication technology creatively, purposefully and critically. Yet this coverage could be strengthened.

To empower young people to engage critically with the messages they encounter through different media channels, the Review recommends that the Government strengthens the role of media literacy in English and Citizenship. We recommend that the nature and expression of emotive language be explored so that students can understand the various ways in which language can be used to persuade, and that GCSE English Language includes analysis of multi-modal and ephemeral text types. Media literacy should be better specified in both the primary and secondary Citizenship curriculum (and Citizenship should be added to the national curriculum in Key Stage 1 and 2). This coordinated approach will ensure all young people are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need for discerning and critical engagement with all forms of media.

## Climate education and sustainability

The climate crisis is already impacting our physical landscape and many connected aspects of our lives. Given the significance of climate change for our society and the planet, it is crucial that young people benefit from an understanding of the climate crisis's causes, consequences and possible solutions and that they are empowered with the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive in tomorrow's industries and tackle the serious challenges facing our planet.

There is currently minimal explicit inclusion of climate education in the national curriculum. For example, there are only limited references to climate science and scientific work to combat climate change in the Science curriculum, while climate change is not explicitly included in the purpose of study for Geography. There is also no statutory requirement to teach climate education in Key Stage 1 or 2 (beyond a non-statutory reference in Citizenship). Whilst there is some climate education at later key stages in the Programmes of Study for Geography and Science (Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4), the depth of content is either minimal or out of date and therefore in need of refreshing. Similarly, D&T has no focus on sustainability, despite the importance of material choice and renewable supply chains in this subject. Teachers have said that the lack of visibility and emphasis on climate education within the national curriculum is a barrier to creating

[83] Kahne, J. & Bowyer, B. (2016) - Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age: Confronting the Challenges of Motivated Reasoning and Misinformation: 'media literacy learning experiences that aim to promote accurate judgment of truth claims appear to be helpful'.

an effective curriculum on climate education.[84] 16-19 providers have also shared evidence of the need for stronger provision.

Climate education is critically important to the economy and for providing learners with the knowledge they need for future work. The solutions to the climate crisis require the expansion of green technology, and this in turn is creating new industries and jobs, and affecting nearly all sectors of the economy. If young people are to make the most of these opportunities, it is crucial that they acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to do so.[85]

Young people have been clear about their desire for a greater focus on this area in their education. As well as being a common theme in our engagement with young people, polling emphasises their level of concern and significant appetite for further information on climate change and climate science, including their desire to support solutions.[86]

We therefore make recommendations to bolster the presence of climate education and sustainability in the Science and Geography curricula, and to emphasise sustainability in the D&T curriculum. Recommendations for earlier sequencing and refreshed content are set out in the relevant chapters of this report focusing on Geography, D&T and Science (see curriculum recommendations by subject). It is important to note that curriculum content is only one part of the issue: pedagogy has an important role in applying an engaging climate lens to existing curriculum content. The Review has seen excellent examples of individual schools and teachers showing leadership in this area, and this is to be encouraged. For 16-19 learners, the Review heard that opportunities in study programmes should build on updated content in the pre-16 national curriculum subjects and equip learners to rise to the challenges of a sustainable future.

[84] Elizabeth A. C. Rushton & Nicola Walshe (2025) - Curriculum making and climate change and sustainability education: a case study of school teachers' practices from England

[85] The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has expressed concern about a lack of awareness about the green economy and its potential for growth, and that it is a 'huge task' to educate the public about the path to net zero. Skills England has emphasised that the transition to net zero is likely to affect one in five jobs, yet despite employment in green industries growing rapidly, awareness of green jobs among young people remains low, with less than half (47%) of secondary students and learners saying they have heard of green job opportunities: DfE (2024) - Skills England: driving growth and widening opportunities. DfE (2024) - Parent, pupil and learner voice: May 2024

[86] A recent poll conducted by the British Science Association found that 85% of young people aged 14 to 18 years think that climate change will affect their future (British Science Association (2020) - Future Forum: Ageing society, AI & data, clean growth and future of mobility). A survey by the Lancet (16 to 25-year-olds) similarly found four in five young people (84%) feel moderately to extremely worried about climate change, and over half (56%) feel powerless to tackle it: (Hickman, C., Marks, E., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, E., Mayall, E. et al. (2021) - Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey). A survey by the Woodland Trust & YouGov (of 16 to 24-year-olds) found that over two-thirds (70%) of young people are worried about climate change and nearly half (46%) feel they have no influence over it (YouGov / Woodland Trust (2023) - Trust Results 230210); Youth Shadow Panel (2025) - Interim Report

## Oracy

The Review considers oracy to incorporate speaking, listening, and communication, including verbal as well as other forms of non-written communication, such as sign language, non-verbal and Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC). The evidence for the benefits of oracy for young people's learning and life chances is well established. According to the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), oracy interventions lead to significant improvements in student outcomes.[87]

Oracy is also important for future study, life and work. Evidence suggests that oracy can support active learning, critical thinking, and enhance students' engagement and understanding.[88] In addition, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) lists communication skills and English language skills in the top 20 skills (out of 161) in both current demand for these skills and the expected future increased demand.[89] Strong verbal communication also has clear benefits throughout life. For example, it improves workplace cohesion and productivity,[90] and it has important benefits for psychological and physical health in later life.[91]

Our review of the evidence has highlighted the need for further support and guidance for oracy and spoken language interventions. In 2024, over a fifth of children did not meet the expected standards in all the early learning goals in communication and language in their Early Years Foundation Stage profile, while those eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those with SEN were less likely than their peers to meet the same standards.[92]

The current national curriculum has some emphasis on spoken language, including in the overarching curriculum aims and individual Programmes of Study throughout the key stages, including the English, Maths and Science curricula at primary and secondary. At 16-19, through the Review's evidence-gathering and conversations with sector specialists, we heard many good examples of schools and colleges designing enrichment, employment and pastoral activities. These were designed to provide opportunities for learners to build confidence in core skills for employment such as communication, teamwork, and leadership. However, we have also heard clearly that these are not sufficiently widespread and that the attention to oracy is insufficient.

Through the Call for Evidence and our wider engagement with the education sector, stakeholders told us that the guidance for schools on spoken language is limited in its

[87] EEF (2025) - Oral language interventions: Technical Appendix
[88] EEF (2025) - Oral language interventions
[89] NFER (2024) - An analysis of the demand for skills in the labour market in 2035 - Revised projections
[90] Haq, I. & Faizan, R (2023) - Communication Within the Workplace: Systematic Review of Essentials of Communication
[91] Fisher, C. & Roccotagliata, T. (2017) - Interpersonal Communication Across the Life Span | Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication
[92] DFE (2025) - Early years foundation stage profile results

scope and specificity. As a result, teaching and spoken language interventions are implemented inconsistently. In addition, the Review Panel received feedback that there is a lack of clear progression for spoken language across both primary and secondary education, with little support or guidance to define progression. This is also emphasised in the Oracy Commission's 2024 report.[93] In summary, the evidence suggests that the current emphasis on spoken language in the curriculum aims is not always reflected in classroom practice, nor is it meeting the needs of all children and young people.

The Review has considered how oracy might be strengthened in specific subjects within the curriculum. The recommendations for oracy in the English chapter emphasise the need for the English curriculum to make speaking and listening requirements more prominent, including through giving greater prominence to Drama (see English). The Citizenship chapter recommends greater specificity on oracy within both the primary and secondary curriculum (with Citizenship being added to the national curriculum in Key Stages 1 and 2) (see Citizenship). More widely, we recommend the introduction of a new oracy framework to support good practice. These recommendations are intended to secure an improved oracy offer to ensure young people benefit from a skill that will help them at every stage of their lives.

We recommend that the Government:

- Introduces an oracy framework to support practice and to complement the existing frameworks for Reading and Writing.[94]

[93] Oracy Education Commission (2024) - We need to talk, 2024

[94] DfE (2023) - The reading framework; DfE (2025) - The writing framework

# Curriculum shape and content

The following section sets out our analysis of compulsory education for children and young people age 5 to 16. We begin by examining the structure and content of the national curriculum. We then set out the curriculum principles we recommend for the refreshing of Programmes of Study. Finally, we assess and make recommendations for each curriculum subject.

## Our view of the key stages

The Review considers the architecture of key stages to be a feature of the English education system that is working well in structuring young people's learning to the end of compulsory schooling.

**Key Stages 1 and 2** provide the foundation for future learning and development. It is a time when pupils develop core knowledge and skills, and consolidate and deepen their understanding across a broad range of subjects, but it is also when they begin to develop curiosity, enthusiasm and joy in learning which can last a lifetime.

Whilst the Review has taken a subject-by-subject approach, recognising the distinct ways in which knowledge and skills develop within each discipline, we also acknowledge the unique nature of primary education and the developmental needs of primary-aged pupils. Key Stages 1 and 2 are not merely preparation for secondary education; they are formative in their own right. The primary context offers opportunities for breadth and for meaningful connections to be drawn across subjects. These connections should be developmentally appropriate and pedagogically rich, helping pupils to build secure foundations for future learning. This approach is not in contrast with the disciplinary integrity of individual subjects but reflects the distinctive potential of the primary phase. A well-designed curriculum in Key Stages 1 and 2 can nurture curiosity, support mastery and foster a love of learning whilst ensuring that pupils are well prepared for Key Stage 3.

Throughout the Review, primary practitioners and subject experts have consistently highlighted that, whilst the curriculum at Key Stages 1 and 2 is broad in its scope, this can come at the expense of depth. The volume of content in many subjects makes it challenging to explore topics in sufficient detail, affecting pupils' ability to master key concepts. Conversely, many of the foundation subjects in the national curriculum lack detail, which means that teachers are unclear about what is sufficient in terms of depth or breadth. This lack of clarity also leads to inconsistent coverage of content across schools, making it more challenging to ensure knowledge is built coherently and sequentially across the key stages. Through our recommendations, we aim to secure strong foundations in numeracy and literacy, ensuring all pupils complete Key Stage 2 with fluency in reading, writing and number. We also seek to guarantee access to a

broad and rich primary curriculum, including subjects such as Citizenship, Languages, and Music. Finally, we support greater breadth and depth in learning to foster curiosity, confidence, and long-term engagement.

**Key Stage 3** lays the foundation for success at Key Stage 4 and beyond. A well-designed Key Stage 3 curriculum is essential for sustained momentum in learning. It covers a broad range of subjects which should engage students, stimulate interest and build successful learning. However, evidence suggests that their progress is being held back by structural challenges. This includes limited continuity between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, and lower resource and/or prioritisation of Key Stage 3 relative to Key Stage 4.

The absence of national data at Key Stage 3 makes it difficult to monitor attainment robustly, but it is clear that progress at Key Stage 3 is often slower than at Key Stage 2, particularly in core subjects.[95] Similar to other key stages, there is also evidence that in Key Stage 3 students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are at risk of falling behind their more affluent peers (even when accounting for prior performance). At this key stage, the performance of initially high-achieving students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds converges significantly with that of initially lower-achieving students from the least disadvantaged backgrounds.[96]

Transitions between schools can be challenging. Entering Key Stage 3, students often face a new school environment and a new curriculum, which can compound any existing difficulties.[97] Stakeholders frequently report that secondary schools tend to plan their Key Stage 3 curriculum backwards from GCSE requirements rather than forward from Key Stage 2 learning, resulting in repetition and leading to disengagement, especially among higher-attaining students.[98] We heard that a lack of detail relating to the requirements many national curriculum subjects across Key Stage 3 - including a lack of clarity on what progression from Key Stage 2 to 3 should look like - hampers effective transitions and the building of knowledge and skills.

Our recommendations are designed to tackle these challenges by improving curriculum content, specificity and continuity, introducing a diagnostic assessment tool to support progress and strengthening the educational experience during this critical stage.

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[95] DfE (2011) - How do pupils progress during key stages 2 and 3?; EPI (2023) - Star Assessments Benchmarking Report 2022/23

[96] Crawford, C., Macmillan, L. & Vignoles, A. (2015) - When and why do initially high attaining poor children fall behind?

[97] DfE (2015) - Key stage 3: the wasted years?; van Rens, M., Haelermans, C., Groot, W. & Maassen van den Brink, H. (2018) - Facilitating a Successful Transition to Secondary School: (How) Does it Work? A Systematic Literature Review; Evans, D., Borriello, G. & Field, A. (2018) - A Review of the Academic and Psychological Impact of the Transition to Secondary Education

[98] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Analysis of Call for Evidence responses; ASCL (2024) - Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence.

**Key Stage 4** is when students begin to specialise. They select qualifications that shape their learning and influence their future pathways because they have a direct impact on access to further education, training and employment. A wide range of academic and vocational subjects are available at Key Stage 4, supported by performance measures designed to encourage breadth and ambition. In particular, Progress 8 has helped to shift the focus towards development over time, rewarding schools for the progress their students make rather than simply their final grades.

We have consistently heard from stakeholders that two challenges impede progress at Key Stage 4. First, the volume of content in Key Stage 4 qualifications, especially in GCSEs, can limit subject depth and squeeze the time available for non-assessed but mandatory subjects such as Physical Education (PE), Religious Education (RE), Citizenship and Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE). Second, although the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) was introduced to promote access to a core academic curriculum and reduce inequalities in subject choice, concerns persist about its impact on students' engagement, curriculum flexibility and the breadth of study (see accountability).

Key Stage 4 should be a phase where students pursue meaningful qualifications, experience a rich and balanced curriculum and prepare confidently for the next stage of their education or training. Our recommendations aim to refine curriculum expectations, recalibrate accountability measures and ensure that all students can access a curriculum that reflects their interests and enables them to achieve and thrive.

## Curriculum principles

We recommend that the Government adopts the following curriculum principles when drafting Programmes of Study for the refreshed national curriculum.

### An entitlement for children and young people

The national curriculum is an entitlement for all children and young people. It ensures their access to the precious knowledge and skills that best supports them to thrive as individuals and as future citizens and workers; in turn, they contribute to the knowledge and experience imparted to future generations. This expression of what we want young people to know and be able to do by the end of statutory schooling is, therefore, an investment, for their benefit and for that of the nation. It should promote their intellectual, social, cultural, spiritual and moral, emotional and physical development. It should be appropriately aspirational, engaging and demanding to reflect the high expectations and excellence our young people deserve.

Curriculum principle:

- The refreshed national curriculum must be an aspirational, engaging and demanding offer that reflects the high expectations and excellence our young people deserve, irrespective of background.

## Knowledge-rich

The refreshed national curriculum should maintain a knowledge-rich approach. This emphasises the building of a deep understanding of subject matter and concepts via carefully sequenced teaching, supporting retention and fluency.[99] This approach also ensures that all children and young people, regardless of background, have access to a broad and rich foundational body of knowledge, thereby reducing inequalities. A curriculum centred on 'powerful knowledge'[100] provides a shared frame of reference for children and young people from different backgrounds, enabling them to engage more effectively with issues affecting them and the world around them.[101]

The refreshed curriculum must provide the knowledge and skills that will empower young people to thrive as citizens, in work and throughout life, in the light of the challenges and opportunities facing them today. A knowledge-rich curriculum need not omit or be in opposition to the development of skills. The skills and capabilities that are an inherent and desirable aspect of a rich, broad and balanced curriculum arise from, and are situated within, a knowledge-rich curriculum.[102]

Curriculum principle:

- The refreshed national curriculum should retain a knowledge-rich approach, ensuring skills are developed in conjunction with knowledge in ways that are appropriate for each subject discipline.

[99] Surma, T., Vanhees, C., Wils, M., Nijlunsing, J., Crato, N., Hattie, J., Muijs, D., Rata, E. & Wiliam, D. (2025) - Developing Curriculum for Deep Thinking: The Knowledge Revival (page 46); EEF (2019) - What do we mean by 'knowledge rich' anyway?; Willingham, D. (2009) - Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom

[100] Young, M. & Muller, J. (2014) - On the Powers of Powerful Knowledge; Young, M., Lambert, D., Roberts, C. and Roberts, M. (2014) Knowledge and the future school: Curriculum and social justice. Bloomsbury Publishing

[101] Wheelahan (2012) - Why Knowledge Matters in Curriculum | A Social Realist Argument; Young, M. (2013) - Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: a knowledge-based approach

[102] Albeit it is important to note that it is teachers, as 'curriculum makers' that enable this in practice; see Deng, Z. (2022) - Powerful knowledge, educational potential and knowledge-rich curriculum: Pushing the boundaries; Lambert, D., Béneker, T. & Bladh, G. (2023) - Teaching Quality in Geography: What Are We Trying to Achieve?

## Curriculum depth and mastery of core concepts

Mastery of core concepts[103] is necessary for children and young people to develop a deep understanding of subject disciplines. Knowledge is cumulative and, with a strong knowledge base (and deliberate revisiting of prior knowledge), they can build new knowledge in their long-term memory more easily.[104] An absence of this can inhibit them from securing the necessary depth of knowledge to make progress in their learning, particularly for some with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).[105] We are not advocating unnecessary repetition, which can reduce engagement. Rather, the curriculum should ensure that children and young people have sufficient space to secure, deepen and extend their foundational knowledge and skills, building on prior learning.

A broad and balanced curriculum remains important, and breadth, particularly across subjects, is essential. Within subjects, however, there must be depth, with a volume of content that permits this.

Curriculum principle:

- The national curriculum should be constructed so that it supports children and young people to master core concepts, ensuring sufficient space for them to build their knowledge and deepen their understanding.

## Curriculum coherence

For a curriculum to work successfully, it needs to be coherent. Coherent curricula are 'articulated over time as a sequence of topics and performances that are logical and reflect, where appropriate, the sequential or hierarchical nature of the disciplinary content from which the subject matter derives'.[106]

Building deep understanding in a curriculum area requires vertical coherence through all phases, meaning the curriculum is carefully sequenced to build on the content and essential concepts in each phase.[107] The construction of such sequences of learning will vary between subject disciplines: for example, it would look different in subjects that are

[103] In this report, we define 'mastery' as acquiring a deep understanding of subject matter, which involves secure knowledge retention and the ability to apply this knowledge in different scenarios. We are not referring to 'mastery learning', a pedagogical approach which EEF gives a clear definition of here, or 'teaching for mastery', a specific approach to teaching mathematics that originated in East Asia.
[104] Alexander, P., Kulikowich, J. & Schulze, S. (1994) - How Subject-Matter Knowledge Affects Recall and Interest; Ansari, A. (1968) - Educational psychology: A cognitive view; Shapiro, A. (2004) - How including Prior Knowledge as a Subject Variable May Change Outcomes of Learning Research
[105] For example, space in the curriculum to ensure foundational knowledge is secure particularly supports pupils with learning difficulties, allowing them to master the core concepts needed to develop further understanding.
[106] Schmidt, W., Houang, R., Cogan, L. (2002) - A coherent curriculum: The case of mathematics
[107] Curriculum designers and academics use different names for the essential concepts of a coherent curriculum, including the 'unifying ideas of the discipline', 'big ideas', 'threads' and 'core concepts'.

largely hierarchical in nature to those that are largely cumulative. Crucially, curriculum coherence should be evident in all cases, because a coherent curriculum supports effective progression between key stages, with students building clear connections between what they have previously learned and what they are learning today. Vertical coherence is not just about sequencing content; it can also support its selection and prioritisation, helping to avoid the overcrowding that can result in rushed and shallow coverage.

It is also important to ensure horizontal coherence in the curriculum. We are committed to the existing subject architecture of the national curriculum. However, better horizontal links could be made across subjects to highlight where content in one area relies on content in another. This supports teachers as well as children and young people. For example, the mathematical content in a given phase might be required simultaneously to access other parts of the curriculum, such as science or financial education. This is particularly important in areas such as literacy, oracy, numeracy or digital literacy, which have coverage and application across numerous curriculum areas. It is especially relevant in the primary phase, where teachers typically teach the full breadth of the curriculum and where well-aligned, cross-disciplinary content can support effective teaching and learning. Horizontal coherence in the curriculum provides children and young people with a coordinated and logical arrangement of topics across subjects, as well as within them.

Curriculum principle:

- Curriculum coherence should be an organising principle for curriculum drafters and support the selection and prioritisation of content. Where appropriate, vertical core concepts on which subjects have been constructed should be clearly presented, and horizontal coherence should be ensured.

## Specificity

Specificity and precise language are essential to securing curriculum continuity, curriculum coherence and aiding mastery of concepts. The Programmes of Study for some foundation subjects currently lack specificity, which can result in teachers feeling pressured to ‘cover all bases’ or repeat content across years and key stages. We are clear that greater specificity should not mean greater volume of content and should not unnecessarily impede schools’ or teachers’ autonomy. Foundation subjects’ Programmes of Study should be drafted with a minimalist approach to added detail, carefully balanced with the need to ensure the greater specificity which aids conceptual mastery, continuity and coherence.

We know that some groups of children and young people are more likely to struggle with transitions between key stages and tend to make poorer progress following them.

We heard through the Call for Evidence that transitions are not always effective between key stages, particularly between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. At Key Stage 3, we also heard that there is repetition in the curriculum which can cause learners to become disengaged. It is essential that curriculum content is clear, specific and demonstrates continuity, avoiding both gaps in essential content and unnecessary repetition of it.

Curriculum principle:

- Foundation subject content should specify the essential substantive knowledge and skills which should be taught to enable children and young people to meet expectations at the end of each key stage.

## Professional autonomy

The national curriculum is only one part of a school's overall curriculum, and it is important that teachers and leaders have space to exercise their professional judgement and innovate. Professional autonomy allows teachers, schools and multi-academy trusts to be creative, innovative and ensure that they can meet children and young people's needs through a locally relevant curriculum.

As we stated in our conceptual position paper,[108] a rich and well-specified national curriculum supports and empowers teachers' professional practice. Teachers act as 'curriculum makers', interpreting and transforming the content in the national curriculum to 'author' instructional events with students in the classroom. At the core of curriculum-making is the process of unpacking and interpreting content to unlock its educational potential.[109] The Review supports the innovation and professionalism of teachers, enabling them to adapt how they teach the curriculum to reflect their students' lives and experiences. The national curriculum is intended as a baseline rather than imposing limits, and it is the expertise of our teachers that brings it to life in the classroom.

Ensuring the profession has the space to develop the curriculum is essential to enable the stretch and/or support learners need, enabling inclusive and adaptive teaching to happen for individual children and young people. This is particularly important in the context of greater numbers of them being identified as having SEND.[110] To that end, the national curriculum should be teachable within the time available and should not be so specific that it restricts teachers' autonomy (see the national curriculum as a tool for teachers).

[108] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Conceptual position paper)
[109] Deng, Z. (2022) - Powerful knowledge, educational potential and knowledge-rich curriculum: pushing the boundaries; Deng, Z. (2025) - Knowledge and curriculum: towards an educational and *Didaktik*/curriculum way of thinking and theorizing
[110] DfE (2025) - Special Educational needs in England over time

Curriculum principle:

- The refreshed national curriculum should ensure the professional autonomy of teachers is maintained, making sure that greater specificity does not substantially restrict teachers' flexibility to choose lesson content and how to teach it.

## A curriculum for all

The national curriculum is for all our children and young people, and they should feel both included in it and represented by it. This is intrinsically important, but it also supports engagement,[111] and ensures that all young people are exposed to a wide range of perspectives that serve to broaden their horizons, rather than limiting them to narrow frames of reference based on their background. As set out in our Terms of Reference, the Review will seek to deliver a curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society (such as protected characteristics and socio-economic background), ensuring all children and young people are represented.

While the national curriculum already offers flexibility for teachers to integrate inclusive and diverse learning experiences, we heard that more needs to be done to ensure that all young people feel represented, to deliver on the equalities duties to support equality of opportunity, and to challenge discrimination.[112] Responses to our Call for Evidence identified opportunities to broaden representation in relation to protected characteristics and socio-economic background across many subjects. In Art and Design, research shows that works by minority ethnic artists are rarely used, despite the subject's potential to reflect Britain's cultural diversity and contributions to the discipline.[113] In English, while the curriculum allows for a range of texts, we heard that in practice selections often lack breadth, shaped by limited availability of resources and a tendency to rely on well-established works.[114] Likewise, we heard that in Drama and Dance, work is needed to broaden the range of creators, performers, styles and genres studied. In History, teachers called for clearer guidance to help them reflect the subject's inherent diversity without replacing core content.[115] In Music, stakeholders noted that terminology and

[111] DfE (2012) - The impact of pupil behaviour and wellbeing on educational outcomes - GOV.UK; UNESCO (2017) - A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education
[112] The National Archives (2025) - Equality Act 2010
[113] Runnymede trust (2024) - Race & inclusion in secondary school art education
[114] Penguin books UK and Runnymede trust (2021) - Lit in Colour; T.S. Dee & E.K. Penner (2017) - The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance
[115] Survey of 497 secondary History teachers in England. Historical Association (2024) Secondary Survey.
[115] Association of School and College Leaders (2024) - ASCL response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review call for evidence
[115] Runnymede Trust (2024) - Curriculum and Assessment Review: A Response from the Runnymede Trust
[115] United Learning (2024) - Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: United Learning response

assessment criteria can limit the inclusion of diverse genres and styles. We recommend updating subject content and Programmes of Study to reflect a broader range of perspectives and experiences, while retaining foundational disciplinary knowledge. Core knowledge and key works that shape a subject must remain central. However, we are clear that diverse contributions to subject disciplines enable a complete, broad and balanced curriculum. This is sometimes more appropriately achieved through teacher selection of content than centralised prescription in the national curriculum and should be supported by high-quality exemplification resources (for example, from Oak National Academy and other providers) and a wider selection of inclusive materials from publishers and exam boards.

Curriculum principle:

- The national curriculum is for all our children and young people. As such, it should reflect our diverse society and the contributions of people of all backgrounds to our knowledge and culture.

We recommend that the Government:

- Reviews and updates all Programmes of Study - and, where appropriate, the corresponding GCSE Subject Content - to include stronger representation of the diversity that makes up our modern society, allowing more children to see themselves in the curriculum.

## The national curriculum as a tool for teachers

The current static nature of the national curriculum's Programmes of Study, which exist online in a series of PDFs, makes it difficult for teachers to locate content in the phases or subjects they do not teach. This has implications for transitions between years and key stages, particularly when this involves a change of teacher or school for children and young people. It can make it harder for teachers to understand previous coverage, make connections to earlier or future learning and set appropriate expectations. This challenge also applies to the GCSE subject content documents, which are presented in the same format. As discussed earlier, if teachers can see the horizontal links across subjects as well as the vertical links within them, the benefits are clear.

The national curriculum should therefore be an active, navigable, online product that is easy to use for teachers and school leaders. Improving its presentation should enhance professional practice by helping teachers to place curriculum content within a larger sequence. By clearly identifying the knowledge and skills which should have been learnt in earlier phases, teachers can introduce new material as part of a seamless education.

We recommend that the Government:

- Develops the national curriculum as a digital product that can support teachers to navigate content easily and to see and make connections across key stages and disciplines.

The curriculum principles already outlined support curriculum design that is inclusive for the majority of students. Access to the national curriculum should remain an expectation for all children and young people and is important for ensuring a broad and balanced education for all, supporting their engagement and wider opportunities. Adaptive teaching plays an important role in supporting inclusion, and in the majority of cases these pupils will be able to study the full national curriculum. There is, however, also a need for clear advice on effective approaches to adapting the curriculum, both to enable young people to access the full curriculum, and to ensure a rich offer and good progress for those who are unable to access it in full. This must support teachers and school leaders to adapt their curriculum for children and young people with SEND, taking into account their varied, multi-faceted needs. Such guidance should be non-statutory.

Bodies such as Oak National Academy may be able to support teachers in this area by providing teachers with resources, progression scaffolds and exemplification of good practice.

We recommend that the Government:

- Develops a programme of work to provide evidence-led guidance on curriculum and pedagogical adaptation (as well as exemplification) for children and young people with SEND, including those in specialist provision, who experience various barriers to accessing the curriculum.

When drafting Programmes of Study, clear aims and ways of working should be established at the outset. All participants and external advisers should subscribe to these. This should aid clarity, manage expectations and avoid sub-optimal compromises being made which are not led by robust evidence, but rather by consensus-seeking.

Maintaining an evidence-led approach is crucial. This must include a variety of evidence, including robust longitudinal data and research. It should include a critical approach to claims and assumptions which are not rigorously substantiated by independent research.

To ensure the refreshed Programmes of Study are deliverable and to help teachers to teach content effectively, the drafting process must involve teachers, as well as be informed by subject specialists' knowledge of the discipline. Consideration of the

curriculum time available is important in drafting Programmes of Study to ensure the national curriculum is ambitious but deliverable. This is crucial for avoiding an overcrowded, ‘shallow’ curriculum.

We recommend that the Government:

- Involves teachers in the testing and design of Programmes of Study as part of the drafting process. This must take into consideration the curriculum time that is available, ensuring the national curriculum is ambitious but teachable within a typical school timetable.

## Curriculum recommendations by subject

In the following sections we discuss and make recommendations for each curriculum subject, in alphabetical order (Cooking and Nutrition, Drama and Dance are included within their parent subjects of Design and Technology (D&T), English and PE, respectively). This includes a summary of some key information on each curriculum subject, including their status in the national curriculum and qualification take-up, where applicable.[116]

### Art and Design

- Art and Design is a statutory foundation subject in the national curriculum from Key Stages 1 to 3.
- At Key Stage 4, the entitlement to study a subject in the arts includes Art and Design. GCSE Art and Design take-up was 26% in 2009/10 and 27% in 2024/25. Technical Award take-up has been 1% since 2015/16.
- In 2024/25, 93% of state-funded schools had entries in the GCSE qualification and 5% into the Technical Award. Overall, 94% of schools offer Art and Design qualifications.
- A Level Art and Design entries made up 6% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 5% in 2023/24.

Art and Design remains a popular subject in the national curriculum. We have heard from many art teachers through our Call for Evidence and public engagement that they enjoy teaching art and that they relish the flexibility of the present curriculum across all key stages. In particular, Art and Design continues to thrive at Key Stage 4. The number of students choosing to take GCSE Art and Design remains strong, demonstrating the subject's continued appeal to young people.[117]

However, sector research and responses to our Call for Evidence highlight certain areas where the national curriculum and the GCSE qualification should be strengthened.[118]

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[116] For 2024/25, Key Stage 4 subject take-up refers to the proportion of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 entering the subject. This is taken by dividing the number of pupils taking each subject (Subject entries 2024/25) by the number of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 in 2024/25; for earlier years, subject trends are taken from Curriculum subject trends over time. A Level entry figures by subjects are taken from: DfE (2024) - 16 to 18 time series attainment and single year entry dashboard

[117] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence: (Curriculum subject trends over time); DfE (2025) - Pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Subject entries 2024/25. To note, whilst GCSE uptake has remained strong, trends for teaching time for Art and Design indicate a slight decline, from 3.5% in 2011/12 to 2.9% in 2024/25. DfE (2025) - Teaching time Key Stage 3-4

[118] Fabian Society (2019) - Primary colours; All-Party Parliamentary Group for Art, Craft and Design (2023) - Art Now: An Inquiry into the state of Art and Design teaching in early years foundation stage, primary and secondary education

We therefore recommend some limited revisions are made to the Art and Design curriculum so that this popular subject continues to deliver the knowledge and skills young people require to thrive creatively.

The current Key Stage 1 to 3 Programmes of Study[119] offer flexibility and autonomy, which are valued by many art teachers. However, feedback from our Call for Evidence highlighted challenges with curriculum content. Sector stakeholders asserted that non-specialist teachers, particularly at primary,[120] can lack the confidence and training to teach the curriculum effectively, citing the lack of detail in the Programmes of Study as a barrier. Ofsted notes the value of building sequential disciplinary, theoretical and practical knowledge in Art and Design through practice, reflection and engagement.[121] However, respondents to the Call for Evidence told us that the current curriculum could do more to articulate how students' practical knowledge and skills should progress throughout their study. We also heard calls to include more detail on using alternative media to meet concerns about a narrow focus on drawing and painting in many settings.[122]

We therefore recommend that the Key Stage 1 to 3 Programmes of Study are revised to clarify the knowledge and skills that pupils are expected to develop. Any revisions should be relatively minimal, retaining the aims of the current Art and Design curriculum and maintaining its focus on creativity. The overall volume of content should not increase, and revisions should add specificity about how to develop knowledge and skills in a sequenced and meaningful way.

GCSE Art and Design is wholly practically assessed, with 60% of the grade based on coursework, and 40% on the production of one or more 'artefacts' during a 10-hour timed period in exam conditions.[123] However, concerns were raised about a lack of clarity around the expected volume of work in a high-stakes context. This has created a perception that, to achieve higher grades, students are expected to generate types or volumes of coursework that are not strictly required by awarding organisations, resulting in significant workload for them, much of it undertaken outside classroom time. In particular, it was felt that expectations around products such as sketchbooks were unclear, especially regarding how much time students should spend creating them and what quantity of work should be represented. We therefore recommend that the volume and range of work required at GCSE are clarified to support teachers to use teaching time more effectively and to ensure that students' workload is proportionate.

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[119] DfE (2013) - National curriculum in England: art and design programmes of study
[120] An Art Now Inquiry survey of 1860 art and design teachers at nursery, primary, secondary and sixth form found that 59% of primary and nursery teachers reported they had no qualifications in art and design at undergraduate degree level or above, compared to 1.6% of secondary teachers: APPG & NSEAD (2023) - Art Now: An Inquiry into the state of Art and Design teaching in early years foundation stage, primary and secondary education
[121] Ofsted (2023) - Research review series: art and design - GOV.UK
[122] Cultural learning alliance (2025) - Evidence – Report card 2025; The Council for Higher Education in Art & Design (2024) - CHEAD response to Curriculum and Assessment Review
[123] DfE (2015) - GCSE Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for Art and Design

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Makes limited revisions to the Key Stage 1 to 3 Art and Design Programmes of Study to clarify and exemplify the knowledge and skills pupils should develop, including through their own creative practice, reflection and critical engagement.
- Works with Ofqual and awarding organisations to clarify the volume and range of coursework students are expected to produce for GCSE Art and Design.

## Citizenship, RHE/RSHE and PSHE

## Citizenship

- Citizenship is a statutory foundation subject at Key Stages 3 and 4. It is not mandatory at Key Stages 1 and 2, although primary schools can choose to teach it using non-statutory Programmes of Study.
- At Key Stage 4, Citizenship must be taught to all students, and some will choose to take a qualification in it. Take-up of the optional GCSE Citizenship Studies qualification is very low (<5%).[124]
- In 2024/25, 18% of state-funded schools had entries into GCSE Citizenship Studies.[125]
- There was no standalone A Level in Citizenship in 2023/24.

Citizenship education helps young people to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to play a full and active role in society.[126] Through the current Programmes of Study, students build their knowledge of democracy, government and the law. They learn about their rights and responsibilities in local, national and international contexts, with opportunities to evaluate evidence critically, to develop reasoned argument and to debate. Evidence from the Association of Citizenship Teaching suggests that Citizenship education leads to positive outcomes in adulthood in relation to attitudes towards, and levels of engagement in, various forms of civic participation.[127] Unlike other national

[124] Entries into Community Development (Citizenship) divided by the total number of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4.
[125] Citizenship is categorised under the subject discount group 'Community development'. See Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex).
[126] DfE (2013) - National curriculum in England: citizenship programmes of study for key stages 3 and 4
[127] Association for Citizenship Teaching (2022) - The Impact of Citizenship Education: a review of evidence for school leaders

curriculum subjects, Ofsted considers Citizenship primarily within the 'personal development' judgement in its current inspection framework.[128]

Recently, there has been strong interest in Citizenship education among a range of stakeholders. Through the Call for Evidence, a number of issues in the Citizenship curriculum have been brought to the Review's attention. They include:

- Financial education: where polling of parents and carers and students, as well as responses to our Call for Evidence, indicate dissatisfaction with present attention to this topic and a strong appetite for more.[129]

- Democracy and government: young people have told us they would like better grounding in this, and stakeholders have highlighted it in relation to the Government's policy to lower the voting age to 16 for all UK elections.[130]

- Media literacy: young people have highlighted a need for greater support to interrogate information in the context of a proliferation of misinformation and disinformation through various media,[131] especially given the amount of time that many children are now spending online.[132]

Citizenship has a key role in teaching many areas of knowledge and skills that support young people to become active and thoughtful citizens. In addition to the three areas above, these include topics such as climate and sustainability, equality duties and challenging discrimination, as well as the development of oracy skills, such as expressing opinions, listening to others' points of view, and agreeing and disagreeing respectfully.

Within this context, the Review has heard many calls for Citizenship to become mandatory at primary to fill perceived gaps in the curriculum. Respondents to the Call for Evidence raised concerns that its non-statutory status is leading to uneven and inconsistent progress in the subject. This also means that opportunities for primary-aged pupils to learn about many of the important topics set out above are inconsistent.

The Review's own research into primary provision, through Teacher Tapp polling, has confirmed this inconsistency. Over 80% of primary teachers, school leaders and headteachers responded that their school provided Citizenship education, but only 41% of primary headteachers said their school followed the non-statutory Programmes of Study.[133] As such, some topics, most notably Active Citizenship and Law and Justice are not always taught in Key Stages 1 and 2. This is in line with research from the University

[128] As opposed to within the 'quality of education' judgement, like other national curriculum subjects. See: Ofsted (2025) - Education inspection framework
[129] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report
[130] Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2025) - 16-year-olds to be given right to vote through election reforms
[131] Ofcom (2024) - Understanding misinformation: an exploration of UK adults' behaviour and attitudes
[132] Ofcom (2024) - Children's media literacy report
[133] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex). To note, MATs have been excluded when calculating the percentage that provide Citizenship education

of Kent, which, likewise, highlights inconsistent practice and indicates that children experiencing greater socio-economic disadvantage have fewer opportunities to develop civic skills and are less likely to be prepared for civic life.[134]

The non-statutory primary Programmes of Study[135] have not been updated since 2001. As a result, some content is duplicated, namely the content relating to health and relationships that now sits in Relationships and Health Education (RHE), first introduced in 2019. Such duplication may be adding to the volume of content in the primary curriculum.

The Review has received compelling evidence and feedback on the need for all primary pupils to receive an education in Citizenship. As such, we are committed to delivering a Citizenship curriculum that has greater clarity and consistency so that all children and young people have the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge to thrive. We therefore recommend that Citizenship becomes statutory from Key Stage 1.

In order not to increase pressures on primary curriculum time, it is important that the statutory Programmes of Study at Key Stages 1 and 2 contain only the essential core elements to support a smooth, sequenced transition into study at Key Stages 3 and 4, and that they complement RHE content. Content duplicated within RHE should be removed from Citizenship in Key Stages 1 and 2. This should ensure that all young people have access to a core entitlement, but nothing precludes primary schools from going further, should they wish.

We recommend the following topics are prioritised in the statutory primary curriculum:

- **Financial literacy:** current Citizenship content includes the purpose of money, how to manage, spend and save money, and the difference between needs and wants. A statutory primary Programme of Study should also equip pupils to develop their financial literacy skills, by understanding risks, core financial concepts, responsible practice, and the use of digital tools. See financial education.
- **Democracy and government**: the curriculum should support democratic understanding and engagement, and develop awareness of and readiness for the planned lowering of the voting age to 16.[136] Content should align with the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect
  and tolerance for those of different faiths and beliefs, all of which schools are already required to promote actively.
- **Law and rights:** a new Programme of Study should ensure that pupils develop an understanding of rules and laws, why they are important, who makes them and the

[134] ESRC (2025) - Educating for Social Good Final Report
[135] DfE (2015) - Citizenship programmes of study for key stages 1 and 2
[136] Subject to legislation.

consequences of not following them. Content should also introduce them to concepts such as fairness and equity, including rights and responsibilities.

- **Media literacy:** new content should ensure age-appropriate skills are developed from primary schooling onwards, including research skills and evaluating information and news sources. See media literacy.
- **Climate education:** primary curriculum content should explore complementary and age-appropriate issues, including sustainable choices and habits and climate justice. See climate education.

To build on this foundation, the secondary Programmes of Study should be aligned with the new primary core. Many responses to the Call for Evidence highlighted the need for updates at Key Stages 3 and 4, asserting that a lack of specificity as well as ambiguous phraseology in the secondary Programmes of Study adds complexity when translating requirements into teaching units and lessons. There were therefore calls for teaching requirements at secondary to be clearer to improve impact and efficiency.

These changes should be delivered by ensuring that currently implicit content at Key Stages 3 and 4 is made more explicit and specific. The intention is not to include additional content. Aligning with primary, content should also be strengthened to address societal changes in an age-appropriate way; for example, equality, equity and countering discrimination and hate, financial education, climate change and the rise of misinformation and disinformation.

Such changes may have implications for the content of GCSE Citizenship Studies. The Review is not making any specific recommendations about this, but the Government should consider and address the impact that any changes to the mandatory non-assessed subject may have on the qualification.

## Relationships and Health Education (RHE) and Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE)

- RHE is a basic curriculum subject[137] for all Key Stage 1 and 2 pupils.
- RSHE is a basic curriculum subject for all Key Stage 3 and 4 students, and for learners in school sixth forms.[138]
- At Key Stage 4, RSHE is not formally assessed and does not have any related qualifications.

[137] A 'basic curriculum' subject is not on the national curriculum, but must be provided by schools. Parents or carers have the right to withdraw their child from these subjects: GOV.UK (2025) - The national curriculum: Overview.
[138] The requirement does not apply to further education colleges.

RHE and RSHE were first introduced to the basic curriculum in 2019. Legislation at that time created a new statutory requirement for schools to publish a written policy for RHE/RSHE and to consult parents and carers on it in advance.

The statutory guidance for RHE/RSHE outlines required content but it is not broken down by key stage. Instead, it presents topics for primary and secondary phases, allowing schools the flexibility to determine when to teach specific content based on students' needs.

The DfE has recently concluded a separate review of the statutory RSHE guidance, which had been announced in March 2023, under the previous Government. As such, the content of RSHE was outside the scope of this Review, although the DfE kept the Review Panel informed of progress. The teaching of the new content will begin from September 2026.

## Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE)

- PSHE is not statutory for state schools.
- At Key Stage 4, PSHE is not formally assessed and does not have any related qualifications.

PSHE is a broader subject than statutory RSHE, typically encompassing economic education, careers and personal safety, although no content is stipulated beyond what is contained in statutory RSHE. Many schools choose to deliver a wider PSHE curriculum and embed statutory RSHE within it, although approaches vary significantly. PSHE is compulsory in independent schools, as they must meet the standards set out in the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 (ISS).[139]

Feedback gathered through the Call for Evidence and the Review's wider engagement highlighted widespread confusion about and conflation of the requirements for RSHE, PSHE and Citizenship education. Many respondents called for clearer guidance and about and expectations for each subject and the distinctions between them.

Concerns were also raised that, although RHE was made compulsory at primary in 2019 and RSHE at secondary, the PSHE components relating to personal finance and careers education were not included as statutory requirements.

The Review's recommendations for Citizenship seek to resolve some of these concerns. By introducing clearer requirements around financial literacy at both primary and

[139] Standard 2.2(d) personal, social, health and economic education which (i) reflects the school's aim and ethos; and (ii) encourages respect for other people, paying particular regard to the protected characteristics set out in the 2010 [Equality] Act.

secondary, we intend to ensure that all young people receive education on this important topic. Additionally, our recommendation to remove overlapping content from the Citizenship Programmes of Study at Key Stages 1 and 2 should help to clarify the distinct roles of RHE/RSHE and Citizenship. Alongside our proposal to make Citizenship statutory at primary level, these changes should support greater coherence across subjects and improve access to essential knowledge.

Separate legal duties apply to maintained schools and academies to secure independent careers guidance for all Year 7 to 13 students, covering the full range of education and training options. The funding agreements of all sixth form colleges and further education (FE) colleges include an equivalent requirement. We have not made any recommendations on these duties as they are outside the scope of the Review's Terms of Reference.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Introduces a statutory measure to ensure that all are taught a core body of essential Citizenship content at primary (including elements of financial and media literacy, and climate change and sustainability).
- Improves the efficacy of primary Citizenship by clarifying the purpose and content of the Key Stage 1 and 2 curriculum and removes any content that duplicates the new RSHE Programme of Study.
- Updates the secondary Programmes of Study for Citizenship to clarify their purpose, improve specificity and improve progression from Key Stage 3 to 4 or to the optional GCSE (including a renewed focus on financial literacy, media literacy, climate and sustainability, equality duties and challenging discrimination, and democracy and government).

## Computing

- Computing is a statutory foundation subject from Key Stages 1 to 4.
- At Key Stage 4, Computing must be taught to all students following the national curriculum, and some will choose to take a qualification in it. Take-up of optional GCSE Computer Science was 3% in 2013/14[140] and 13% in 2024/25. Technical Award ICT take-up was 27% in 2015/16 and 3% in 2024/25.[141]

[140] GCSE Computer Science was introduced in 2013/14.
[141] There was a significant drop in take up of ICT Technical Awards from 30% in 2016/17 to 9% in 2017/18 due to the removal of the European Computer Driving License from performance tables.

- In 2024/25, 75% of state-funded schools entered students for the GCSE and 25% for the Technical Award. Overall, 81% of schools offer Computing-related qualifications.
- A Level Computer Science entries made up 1% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 2% in 2023/24.

Computing education must equip children and young people to participate fully in a technology-driven world and to thrive in the workplace, whether they want to pursue careers in the digital sector or use technology effectively in other fields. However, evidence suggests a decline between 2011/12 and 2024/25 in dedicated teaching time for Computing, falling from 4% to 3% of total teaching time at Key Stage 3 and from 5% to just 2% at Key Stage 4.[142]

Despite reasonably wide access in schools,[143] take-up of Computing qualifications is relatively low at Key Stage 4. Following its introduction in 2013/14, GCSE Computer Science saw rapid initial growth, but entries have since plateaued at 12-13%. Technical Awards in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) also continue to see limited uptake.[144] Especially, take-up of Computing has declined among girls: take-up of GCSE Computer Science is now 20% for boys versus 6% for girls, and for the ICT Technical Award it is 5% for boys versus 2% for girls.[145]

Computing must be taught to all students following the national curriculum to the end of Key Stage 4.[146] However, we have heard concerns that this requirement is not consistently met. Polling conducted for the Review found that approximately 80% of teachers from maintained schools report that Computing is taught at Key Stage 4 only to students taking GCSE Computer Science, while only around 10% of them say that Computing is taught to all Key Stage 4 students.[147] This suggests a significant gap between policy and practice.

Where Computing is being taught, we have heard concerns that it is being taught inconsistently. Apart from important issues of teacher supply, responses to the Call for Evidence suggest that this inconsistency stems from a lack of clarity in the

[142] DfE (2025) - Teaching time for Key Stage 3-4
[143] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[144] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence: (Curriculum subject trends over time); DfE (2025) - Pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Subject entries 2024/25
[145] Findings from the SCARI (2024) - The Future of Computing Education; Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[146] This requirement will also apply to academies following the Government's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: DfE (2025) - Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: policy summary notes
[147] Polling of secondary senior leaders undertaken through Teacher Tapp commissioned by the Review. Results weighted to reflect national teacher and school demographics. To note, MATs have been excluded here.

secondary Programmes of Study, particularly at Key Stage 4, where they are exceptionally short (just three bullet points). Many respondents called for greater specificity to support stronger implementation and improve the quality of teaching. We therefore recommend that the Computing curriculum is updated to provide greater clarity at each key stage. Programmes of study should support students to develop the knowledge and skills they need to flourish as well-informed and competent participants in a digital world, and to develop the behaviours and confidence to use technologies (including AI) and systems creatively, safely and effectively.

Responses to the Call for Evidence called for a stronger integration of digital literacy across the curriculum, given the ubiquitous and cross-cutting nature of digital technology. While Computing should remain the primary subject for teaching computing knowledge and skills, we recognise that aspects of digital literacy are relevant to other subjects. Certain subjects can be enriched through the thoughtful application of computing knowledge.[148] Therefore, we see an opportunity to support students in applying the skills they learn in Computing by including clearly defined references to using computing skills in other subjects, where relevant and feasible, bearing in mind constraints on resources and school IT infrastructure. These references should be aligned with the Computing curriculum at each key stage to ensure coherence and progression.

Some responses highlighted the absence of AI and real-world applications in the Computing curriculum, suggesting updates are needed to keep the subject up to date. The current curriculum does not preclude teachers from integrating the latest developments into their teaching and at least one exam board already includes AI content in its GCSE Computer Science specification.[149] This is to be welcomed. AI is a transformative new technology and, while the Review considers the best approach to future-proofing students' learning is to ensure they have a strong foundation in core knowledge, we also recognise the need to integrate emerging technologies where appropriate. A revised Programme of Study should therefore specify the core computing concepts that students should have mastered at each stage and explicitly incorporate AI. GCSE Computing specifications should also include AI where they do not already. However, given the rapid pace of digital innovation, we recommend minimising references to specific products or versions of fast-evolving technologies, and allowing for light touch updates to the curriculum as needed (see future curriculum reviews).

Computing in the national curriculum encompasses computer science, information technology and digital literacy topics. There are concerns that the GCSE, which focuses primarily on computer science, does not represent the full breadth of the subject. Unlike other GCSEs that offer a broad and balanced foundation, GCSE Computer Science is seen as a more specialised qualification. Analysis of pre-pandemic data supports this

[148] Current examples include the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in Geography, and 3-D modelling in Design and Technology.
[149] For example, Pearson Edexcel GCSE (2020) GCSE L1 L2 Computer Science 2020 Specification

concern; on average students achieved 0.72 of a grade less in GCSE Computer Science compared to their other subjects.[150] This discrepancy is worse for girls taking the GCSE, who typically achieved 1.11 of a grade lower than in their other subjects.[151] This is a significant cause for concern, given the importance of digital and computing knowledge. There is evidence that a range of factors, many outside of the Review's remit, affect girls' engagement with Computer Science, including systemic factors such as gender stereotyping of computing and related careers, as well as factors more specifically school-based, such as pedagogy and resources.[152] The Review Panel has also considered evidence that GCSE Computer Science is perceived to be less relevant to girls and that integrating more of the wider Computing curriculum would better engage a broader range of students, including girls.[153]

Engagement with computing experts and organisations during the Review highlighted the potential benefits of a broader GCSE in Computing. Such a qualification could better reflect the range of knowledge and skills young people need and address current shortages in the digital economy. Research shows that nearly one in four (23%) businesses face skills gaps in basic digital skills, rising to over one in three (37%) with gaps in advanced digital skills.[154] Expert stakeholders have therefore called for the GCSE to cover a wider range of topics beyond Computer Science in order to appeal to a more diverse student population and to meet society's broader needs.

The Review therefore recommends introducing a revised GCSE in Computing that retains a foundation in Computer Science, while expanding to include content on the effective and critical application and creation of technology. This broader qualification should replace the current Computer Science GCSE and prepare young people for both specialist careers in computing and for applying digital technology and data across a wide range of fields. It should enable them to progress to further study, including A Level Computer Science, and/or to pursue a career in computing and digital fields.

It is important to note contextual challenges. A significant shortage of specialist Computing teachers affects the quality of provision.[155] Access to devices and

[150] The SCARI Computing Project (2024) - GCSE results comparison
[151] The SCARI Computing Project (2024) - GCSE results comparison
[152] National Centre for Computing Education (2023) - Gender Insights in Computing Education
[153] Evidence from the SCARI (2024) - Subject Choice, Attainment and Representation in Computing project, found that at Key Stage 3 girls were significantly more interested than boys in topics such as digital media, project work and presentation work. Raspberry Pi (2022) – Using relevant contexts to engage girls in the Computing classroom also found that contextualising computing skills can make the subject more relevant for women and girls.
[154] WorldSkills UK & Enginuity (2021) - Disconnected: Exploring the digital skills gap - In this report, World Skills UK define 'basic digital skills', as 'a proficiency with common software such as Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint; ability to process digital information and content; ability to communicate digitally; and the ability to learn new digital skills etc'. They define 'advanced digital skills' as 'a good knowledge across a range of digital skills, as well as in-depth specialist knowledge in one or more area, such as computer aided design, coding, specialist digital software etc.'
[155] Demonstrated by the fact that, in 2024/25, only 66% of teachers teaching Computer Science in Key Stage 3 had a relevant post-A Level qualification; for ICT this was 48%. Whilst this is less severe for Key

infrastructure also varies in schools, although we note that the DfE has made £45 million available to improve schools' digital connectivity to close the 'digital divide'.[156] These realities must be considered, but we must ensure that the curriculum is ambitious and provides children and young people with the knowledge and skills they will need.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Provides greater clarity in the Computing curriculum about what students should be taught at each key stage so that they build the essential digital literacy required for future life and work.
- Replaces GCSE Computer Science with a Computing GCSE which reflects the full breadth of the Computing curriculum and supports students to develop the digital skills they need.
- Reviews where digital skills and technologies have become an integral part of subject disciplines other than Computing. Where this is the case, it should determine whether to include this specific digital content in those subjects' Programmes of Study, sequenced and aligned with the Computing curriculum.

## Design and Technology, including Cooking and Nutrition

## Design and Technology (D&T)

- At Key Stages 1 to 3, D&T is a compulsory foundation subject.
- At Key Stage 4, there is an entitlement to study D&T. Take-up of any D&T (including Food Technology) GCSE[157] was 40% in 2009/10. Take-up of GCSE D&T was 11% and 8% for GCSE Food Preparation and Nutrition in 2024/25.
- In 2024/25, 57% of state-funded schools entered students for GCSE D&T.
- A Level D&T entries made up 2% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 1% in 2023/24.

Stage 4 the problem persists: 84% of teachers teaching Computer Science in Key Stage 4 had a relevant post-A Level qualification; for ICT this was 72%. DfE (2025) - School workforce in England

[156] The Education Hub (2025) - How we're breaking down the digital divide in schools

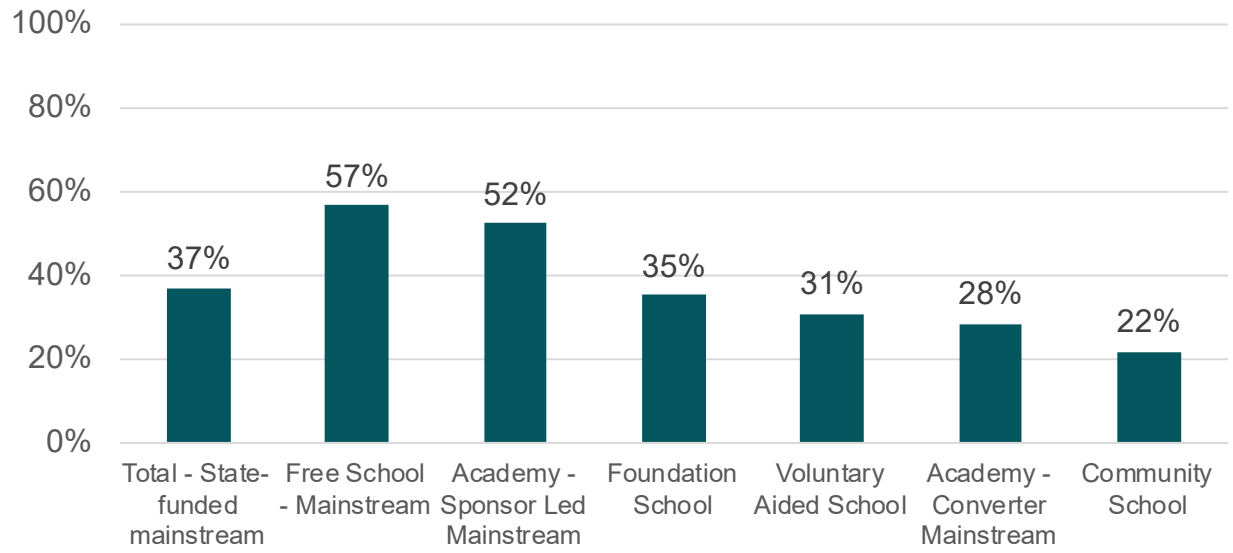
[157] From 2009/10 to 2017/18, GCSE D&T had several different optional strands: Electronic Products, Food Technology, Graphic Products, Industrial Technology, Product Design, Resistant Materials Technology, Systems & Control and Textiles Technology. One D&T GCSE in all material areas was introduced in 2017/18, with the exception of Food Preparation and Nutrition, which became a standalone GCSE in 2016/17.

The evidence gathered during the Review suggests that D&T in schools has long been in poor health. We have seen a substantial decline in entries for GCSE D&T since 2005,[158] and many stakeholders attribute this decline to the omission of D&T from accountability measures, such as the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). However, uptake had already been declining before the EBacc was introduced,[159] especially given D&T ceased to be a compulsory GCSE subject in 2000.[160]

Evidence indicates that D&T may not be offered consistently across schools. Although the national curriculum (and therefore the Key Stage 4 entitlement) is not currently compulsory in academies or free schools, Ofsted expects them to offer a curriculum that is similar in 'breadth and ambition' to the national curriculum and it inspects against this requirement. Figure 5. Percentage of state-funded mainstream schools with no entries into GCSE D&T in 2024/25 shows that 37% of state-funded mainstream schools had no GCSE entries in D&T in 2024/25. This is more pronounced in free schools (57%) and sponsor-led academies (52%), but 35% of foundation mainstream schools, 31% of voluntary aided schools and 22% of community schools (who have to follow the national curriculum) also did not enter any students for the GCSE.[161] Omnibus survey data shows that 17% of Key Stage 3 students wanted to study D&T but were unable to, the highest rate among subjects in the national curriculum.[162]

[158] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence: (Curriculum subject trends over time); DfE (2025) - Pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Subject entries 2024/25
[159] Ofqual (2025) - GCSE outcomes in England
[160] D&T Association (2015) - Why has the number of teenagers taking design and technology GCSE dropped?; JCQ (2009) - Entry trends for GCSE, Applied GCSE and Entry Level Certificate Results, Summer 2009
[161] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[162] DfE (2023) - Parent, pupil and learner panel omnibus surveys for 2022 to 2023 – see table 4 in 'Parent, Pupil and Learner Panel - wave 5 - pupils and learners' in the underlying data for responses from year 7 to 9 pupils

**Figure 5. Percentage of state-funded mainstream schools with no entries into GCSE D&T in 2024/25[163]**




This inequality of access is especially pronounced along lines of disadvantage. In 2024/25, 60% of state-funded mainstream schools with the highest proportion of disadvantaged students had no entries for GCSE D&T, compared to less than a fifth (17%) of schools with the lowest proportion of disadvantaged students.[164]

We recognise that the decrease in the number of schools offering D&T is likely to reflect a range of factors, rather than necessarily indicating a reduction in how schools value D&T. It is therefore unlikely that this complex issue can be tackled solely through this Review. We have heard that many of the barriers extend beyond the curriculum, such as a lack of specialist staff, lack of infrastructure and the cost of delivery. The lack of specialist D&T staff is reflected in the fact that, in 2023/24, only 27% of the initial teacher training recruitment target for D&T was met.[165] Since the Government's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024 contains a provision that all state-funded schools, including academies, will be required to teach the national curriculum,[166] these challenges may become more pronounced. The DfE will need to consider how to tackle them during the implementation of any curriculum changes following the conclusion of the Review.

Although there are wider barriers to delivering D&T, changes can be made to curriculum content to refresh the subject and make it more relevant and easier for schools to deliver.

[163] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[164] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[165] HoC Education Committee (2024) - Teacher recruitment, training and retention
[166] DfE (2025) - Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: policy summary notes

The Call for Evidence showed that primary D&T is broadly working well and that content is relevant and 'deliverable with guidance' by non-specialist teachers.[167] However, respondents highlighted that the transition from Key Stage 2 to 3 remains problematic, with Key Stage 3 not building on what has been achieved earlier.

Stakeholders highlighted that the purpose of study and aims[168] of the D&T curriculum were becoming increasingly outdated. Experts told us that the current aims should be updated to clarify the subject's distinctive and practical nature. They wanted the aims to specify the core knowledge and skills which build D&T capability, to better support students to think like designers and engineers. This was especially noted for Key Stage 3. Stakeholders argued that updates were needed to support progression to GCSE and beyond, and that they should explicitly embed attributes such as problem solving, iteration and testing.[169]

Stakeholders also told the Review of the importance of decision-making in relation to material selection. They stated that pupils and students should experience working with a range of materials, guided by a contextual understanding of why the materials have been chosen. Stakeholders noted that this is often not the case at present, as many pupils and students are simply required to memorise a list of materials and their properties in isolation. They argued that changes in this area would align the D&T curriculum better with modern, real-world design practice.

Stakeholders also suggested that social responsibility and inclusive design should be more explicitly embedded.[170] They argued that D&T has the potential to be a key subject for learning green knowledge and skills,[171] teaching children and young people how they can use D&T to solve problems and create solutions for societal and environmental issues. However, stakeholders highlighted that the current programme of study for D&T does not explicitly mention sustainability or the benefits of a circular economy (see climate education).

Finally, stakeholders have called for clearer expectations about a 'final product', especially at Key Stage 3. They said this should be alongside a clear emphasis on the full design process, including design content and theory. Following the last curriculum review, the focus is on the process of iterative design and 'prototyping' to solve real-world

[167] See, for example, the Design & Technology Association's response to the Call for Evidence (2024), which was informed by over 200 teacher submissions: Curriculum review response
[168] As outlined at DfE (2023) - National curriculum in England: design and technology programmes of study
[169] Design and technology association - D&T Association (2023) - Reimagining design and technology report
[170] 'Social responsibility' in the design sector refers to a broad set of societal considerations that go into 'good' design, such as inclusivity (user needs including abilities, ages, culture), environmental sustainability (materials and processes, reducing waste), and ethical practices (labour practices, ethical sourcing of materials, transparency, repairability).
[171] For example, concepts such as material responsibility, circularity, energy, product lifecycles, and manufacturing processes.

problems, although requirements to create high-quality products have been retained.[172] This Review recognises young people's satisfaction and enjoyment in realising a finished article. These opportunities are important and should be maintained. However, we understand that some confusion exists about what creating 'high-quality prototypes and products' means in practice, and we are clear that understanding the design process and developing iterative design skills should remain fundamental.

We therefore recommend updating the purpose of study and aims of D&T to reflect these changes and clarifications, so that it is seen as an exciting and ambitious subject that can introduce students to skills in design and making, as well as prepare them for technical careers in design, creative and advanced manufacturing industries.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Rewrites the D&T subject aims to be more aspirational, and clarifies the purpose of study to focus on the subject's distinct body of knowledge and capabilities, with a particular focus on Key Stage 3.
- Refines the D&T curriculum and GCSE subject content to:
  - Explicitly include how to achieve sustainable resolutions to design challenges.
  - Embed the teaching of social responsibility and inclusive design explicitly within the curriculum, as appropriate to the key stage, throughout the design process.
  - Support the development of critical decision-making skills about material selection.
  - Ensure that realising designs remains integral to pupils' experience of D&T.

## Cooking and Nutrition

- At Key Stages 1 to 3, Cooking and Nutrition forms part of the statutory D&T Programmes of Study.
- At Key Stage 4, GCSE Food Preparation and Nutrition is a separate qualification and is not part of the Key Stage 4 D&T entitlement.
- From 2009/10 to 2016/17, GCSE D&T had a Food Technology strand which saw a decline in take-up from 10% to 5% during that time. Take-up of the standalone

[172] DfE (2013) - National curriculum in England: design and technology programmes of study

GCSE in Food Preparation and Nutrition was 8% in 2017/18 and 8% in 2024/25.[173]

- In 2024/25, 46% of state-funded schools entered students for GCSE Food Preparation and Nutrition.[174]

Cooking and Nutrition teaches pupils how to cook and apply the principle of nutrition and healthy eating, a crucial life skill that enables them to feed themselves and others affordably and healthily, now and in later life.[175] Since 2010/11, teaching time for Cooking and Nutrition at Key Stage 3 has consistently comprised between 0.7 and 0.8% of all hours taught.[176] Stakeholders argue that common school timetabling, which incorporates D&T 'rotational' or 'carousel courses' of just a few weeks each year, inhibits effective progression and results in less teaching time for Cooking and Nutrition. The food teaching sector has called for it to become a standalone subject, with 73.5%[177] of respondents to a Food Teachers Centre survey saying that they would like to see it removed from D&T.[178]

The Review does not recommend separating out Cooking and Nutrition from D&T at Key Stages 1 to 3 due to existing pressures on curriculum time and the additional burden that this would place on schools. However, we heard through the Call for Evidence and sector engagement that the Cooking and Nutrition section of the D&T Programme of Study is currently under-specified. Respondents argued that this lack of detail results in inconsistent and patchy provision and, as a result, too many pupils are being denied the opportunity to master the subject's core knowledge and skills. According to stakeholders, this is especially concerning given the skills shortages in the UK food systems sector.[179]

Many stakeholders have stressed the need for additional wording in the Programme of Study about practical cookery to emphasise that it is not only about how to prepare food. Respondents to the Call for Evidence identified topics that are either not as prominent as they should be or not included at all, such as food hygiene, healthy eating and sustainability. Although some students will pursue a qualification in Food Preparation and Nutrition at Key Stage 4, and so preceding key stages should prepare them for this, many students' Cooking and Nutrition education ends at Key Stage 3. The Review feels,

[173] From 2009/10 to 2017/18, GCSE D&T had several different optional strands: Electronic Products, Food Technology, Graphic Products, Industrial Technology, Product Design, Resistant Materials Technology, Systems & Control and Textiles Technology. One D&T GCSE in all material areas was introduced in 2017/18, with the exception of Food Preparation and Nutrition, which became a own standalone GCSE in 2016/17.
[174] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex). To note, GCSE Food Preparation and Nutrition is categorised under the subject group 'Food Technology'.
[175] DfE (2013) - National curriculum in England: design and technology programmes of study - GOV.UK
[176] DfE (2025) - Teaching time Key Stage 3-4
[177] Of 517 respondents, the majority of whom were Food teachers.
[178] The Food Teachers Centre (2023) - Food education – fit for the future?
[179] Food Standards Agency (2023) - Impact of labour shortages: Labour shortages in UK food systems

therefore, that the focus should be on learning about food and nutrition, including how to cook healthy, nutritious meals, which is also an essential building block for further study and professional routes.

We recommend renaming 'Cooking and Nutrition' as 'Food and Nutrition' and drafting a new set of subject aims so that young people receive a thorough grounding in practical cooking skills, as well as a broader understanding of concepts such as food hygiene and sustainability. To accompany this, we recommend further detail in the Programmes of Study for Key Stages 1 to 3 about developing the knowledge and skills students need to live a healthy, balanced life, as well as those necessary for further study (with a view to future careers). This should not mean removing essential cooking content, but rather that the curriculum should set out more clearly the full breadth of foundational knowledge and skills that students will need throughout their lives, and which will allow them to make informed food choices as individuals.

Finally, we have heard concern that the removal of A Levels in Food Technology and Food and Nutrition in 2016 has removed routes for learners interested in careers in food science, nutrition, dietetics and food technology.[180] There are currently limited alternative level 3 qualifications in this sector, with the focus mainly on hospitality and catering. We therefore recommend that the Government reviews the current level 3 vocational qualifications in Food and Nutrition and considers whether our recommended changes to introduce V Levels offers an opportunity to review this (see V Levels recommendations).

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Renames the subject 'Food and Nutrition' and ensures it has its own aims and purpose of study that better reflect what it covers and its discrete identity within D&T.
- Ensures that sufficient detail in the curriculum sets clear expectations about what should be taught at each key stage to reflect the fact that the subject develops skills for life as well as progression to further study.
- Reviews the level 3 vocational options for food science to determine the best means of ensuring that the needs of learners are met and that there is a strong 'pipeline' into higher education and careers.

[180] Food teachers centre (2021) - A Level Food: The Gap that Remains

## English, including Drama

## English

- English is a statutory core curriculum subject throughout Key Stages 1 to 4.
- At the end of Key Stage 2 in 2024/25, 75% of pupils met the expected standard in reading, 72% in writing and 73% in grammar, punctuation and spelling. In 2024/25, 80% of pupils met the expected standard in the Phonics Screening Check in year 1, increasing to 89% by the end of Year 2.
- Any English[181] GCSE take-up was 94% in 2009/10; for GCSE English Language and GCSE English Literature, take-up was 91% and 87% respectively in 2024/25.
- In 2024/25, 98% of state-funded schools had entries into GCSE English Language and 93% into GCSE English Literature.
- A Level English entries (including A Level English Language, A Level English Literature and A Level English Language and Literature) made up 11% of all entries in 2009/10[182] and 7% in 2023/24.
    - A Level English Language entries made up 3% of A Level entries in 2015/16 and 2% in 2023/24.
    - A Level English Literature entries made up 6% of A Level entries in 2015/16 and 5% in 2023/24.
    - A Level English Language and Literature entries made up 2% of A Level entries in 2015/16 and 1% in 2023/24.

Children's progress in literacy and English is assessed through the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) in Key Stage 1, and end of Key Stage 2 assessments in English reading, writing and grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS). PISA 2022 compared the performance of 15-year-olds in 81 countries and economies around the world and found that England's average score in reading (496) was significantly above the OECD average (476).[183] Attainment in reading at the end of Key Stage 2 has been recovering and has returned to pre-pandemic levels.[184] The percentage of pupils who met the expected standard in the Phonics Screening Check in Year 1 is nearing pre-pandemic (2018/19) levels of 82%, standing at 80% in 2024/25.[185] The effectiveness of phonics is well

[181] Data on separate GCSE English subjects (Language; Literature; and Language & Literature) are not available for 2009/10 because of the way English entries were recorded.
[182] Due to the way English entries were recorded, data on separate A Level English subjects (Language; Literature; and Language & Literature) were available only from 2015/16 onwards.
[183] PISA (2022) - National report for England
[184] DfE (2025) - Key stage 2 attainment: National headlines, Academic year 2024/25
[185] DfE (2025) - Phonics screening check attainment 2024/25. Some pupils take the PSC in Year 2 (see 2025 phonics screening check assessment and reporting arrangements - GOV.UK). When considering all

evidenced,[186] and respondents to the Call for Evidence generally praised the role of phonics in teaching literacy.

However, attainment in writing and in GPS has still not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels, and gaps remain in English attainment across key stages. Over a quarter of pupils did not meet the expected standard in writing (28%) or in GPS (27%) in 2024/25 by the end of Key Stage 2, and one quarter (25%) of pupils did not meet the expected standard in reading.[187] Furthermore, 31% of students do not achieve level 2 in English by age 16 each year and 20% do not achieve this by age 19 (Table 3). This is significant, since level 2 English, indicated by a GCSE grade 4, is typically required for access to further study and employment.

**Table 3. Percentage of learners not achieving level 2 English by age 16 and 19, split by FSM status, 2018/19[188]**

| | Age 16 | Age 19 |
|---|---|---|
| All Students | 31% | 20% |
| Free school meals | 52% | 39% |
| No free school meals | 27% | 17% |

Uptake at A Level has been declining. Between 2009/10 and 2014/15, entries to A Levels in English (Language, Literature and combined) consistently represented around 11% of entries, but this had declined to 7% by 2023/24.[189]

The Call for Evidence highlighted several areas for improvement. First, a clear dissonance exists between highly specified curriculum content at Key Stages 1 and 2 and under-specified content at Key Stages 3 and 4.[190] Consultation with expert stakeholders indicates that this leads to challenge at transition because, for example, literacy-focused content at Key Stages 1 and 2 is not always reviewed and built on at subsequent key stages. This can mean that pupils who did not master key skills and knowledge by the end of Key Stage 2 are left behind. We therefore recommend that the curriculum provides greater clarity and precision on the aims of each key stage so that both English and literacy are developed sequentially and coherently. We recommend that

pupils who have taken the PSC by the end of Year 2, a similar trend is observed, with 89% reaching the expected standard in 2024/25 compared with 91% doing so in 2018/19.

[186] EEF (2021) – Phonics, Teaching and Learning Toolkit

[187] DfE (2025) - Key Stage 2 attainment: National headlines, Academic year 2024/25

[188] DfE (2025) - Attainment by characteristics – based on the cohort of learners reaching academic age 18 in 2018/19, the latest cohort of learners not affected by COVID-19--related grading changes.

[189] DfE (2025) - A level time series

[190] DfE (2014) - National curriculum in England: English programmes of study

particular attention is given to the Key Stage 3 Programme of Study so that it can better support transition.

Respondents also called for more specificity in oracy[191] and Drama, recognising these as beneficial for life and work.[192] Although requirements for speaking and listening and Drama exist in the current English Programmes of Study, responses to the Call for Evidence highlighted that lack of specificity can lead to variation in the quality of teaching. Ofsted also found that spoken language is not always well understood or taught effectively.[193] We therefore recommend that, throughout the English curriculum, requirements for speaking and listening are given greater clarity and the curricular aims and outcomes are better specified. This should be supported by the creation of an oracy framework to give further guidance (see oracy).

We also heard that the English curriculum contains a high volume of grammatical content and terminology, assessed by the GPS test at the end of Key Stage 2.[194] For example, pupils are required to identify and name grammatical constructs, such as fronted adverbials, the subjunctive mood and the present progressive tense. Responses to our Call for Evidence suggest that this content is advanced and overly theoretical at this key stage, disengages pupils, and, crucially, does not help them to write well, with significant time often dedicated to teaching grammar in isolation at the expense of teaching effective application. This is a particular concern given that over a quarter (28%) of pupils do not meet the expected standard in writing at Key Stage 2.[195] The Call for Evidence responses suggested there is too much emphasis given to reproducing textual features rather than developing composition skills. We note that the DfE is acting to address weaknesses in writing, and we welcome the publication of its writing framework.

We are clear that a thorough knowledge and understanding of grammar is crucial to success, not just in English but across all subjects. We therefore recommend that the grammatical content in the primary Programmes of Study should be reviewed and streamlined in order to place greater emphasis on content that supports pupils' ability to read and write effectively. This should include a stronger focus on using and applying grammar rather than on identifying theoretical constructs by name, which is not developmentally appropriate or meaningful. This should help to ensure a stronger foundation in literacy while avoiding curriculum overload. We also recommend that the current Key Stage 2 GPS test should be amended, retaining some elements of the GPS

[191] As detailed in Oracy, the Review considers oracy to incorporate speaking, listening and communication, including verbal as well as other forms of non-written communication such as sign-language, non-verbal and Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC).
[192] Oracy Education Commission (2024) - We need to talk
[193] Ofsted (2024) - Telling the story: the English education subject report
[194] Note that the assessment of grammar, punctuation and spelling is not entirely separate from teacher-assessed writing as the teacher assessment framework evaluates the extent to which pupils employ these features correctly.
[195] DfE (2025) - Key stage 2 attainment: National headlines, Academic year 2024/25

test, but including new tasks to more effectively assess writing composition and the use of grammar and punctuation (see primary assessment).

It is essential that knowledge gaps in reading, writing, grammar, punctuation and spelling are diagnosed as early as possible. We encourage all schools to use the non-statutory Key Stage 1 tests to provide greater insights for Key Stage 2 teachers. We also recommend introducing a diagnostic test, in Year 8, to assess key capabilities, aiming to support teachers in identifying and tackling areas of weakness in good time before students progress to Key Stage 4 (see secondary assessment).

We also heard two key areas of feedback relating to GCSE English. Almost all students are entered for English Language at the end of Key Stage 4 (91%), and the majority also take English Literature (87%). However, stakeholders and responses to the Call for Evidence identified substantial duplication between the two qualifications, with the study of literary texts a significant feature of GCSE English Language. Stakeholders overwhelmingly argued for significant changes to this qualification, including greater use of a broader and more relevant range of text types, and a greater focus on the study of language.[196]

The Review therefore believes that a fundamental change to GCSE English Language is needed, achieved through changes to the Key Stage 4 English Programme of Study. We propose that the revised GCSE English Language should have a distinct purpose from GCSE English Literature, focusing on the study of the nature and expression of language (including spoken language). The range of text types studied in English Language should be expanded to include multi-modal and 'ephemeral' texts (such as online content and print media), an understanding of which is essential for navigating the contemporary world.[197]

The written assessment should reflect, in two ways, the greater focus on the nature and expression of language and more diverse text types. First, the unseen texts used for language analysis should avoid direct duplication with English Literature exam content. Second, extended writing tasks should draw from a broader range of writing genres to increase students' opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities. We believe that these changes will better reflect the purpose of English Language and equip students to use language more effectively to express themselves. It should also provide an opportunity to support young people in their development of media literacy skills, particularly in learning how the nature and expression of language can influence readers. See media literacy.

[196] English Association (2024) - EA response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review call for evidence; Cambridge OCR (2024) - Striking the balance: A review of 11–16 Curriculum and Assessment in England; National Association for Teaching of English (2024) - NATE calls for reforms to English Curriculum and Assessment

[197] Cambridge OCR (2024) - Striking the balance: A review of 11–16 Curriculum and Assessment in England

As noted above, GCSE English Literature has seen a marked increase in entries since 2015/16, the year in which Progress 8 was introduced to all schools. However, take-up at A Level has fallen. English Literature entries made up 6% of all state-school A Level entries in 2015/16, falling slightly to 5% by 2023/24.[198] Many respondents to our Call for Evidence and expert stakeholders argued that a 'dry' curriculum diet in GCSE English has contributed to a reduced enthusiasm for English at A Level. They suggested that greater representation within, and diversity of, GCSE texts would engage students more effectively. This approach has been found to support students' engagement and outcomes, alongside empathy and understanding of others.[199]

The current Key Stage 4 Programme of Study for English allows for the inclusion of diverse texts. The GCSE English Literature subject content document requires students to study at least one play by Shakespeare, at least one 19th century novel, fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards and a selection of post-1789 poetry (which must include representative Romantic poetry, consist of a minimum of 300 lines of poetry and at least 15 poems).[200] Exam boards specify the texts approved in their GCSE specifications, and these include a range of texts that teachers can select. However, we have heard concern that, in practice, the texts selected often lack breadth and representation. Due to a lack of resource and capacity (and, for some, a relative lack of confidence in teaching new works), teachers often rely on texts that they have taught for a long time.

The Review Panel believes it to be crucial that all students, regardless of background, continue to study our rich literary heritage. This should include Shakespeare and classic novels that explore enduring social and political themes and debates which remain at the heart of our culture and politics. Without access to these established works, young people risk missing out on important cultural capital, as well as broader enrichment. However, given the breadth that exists within English literature, the curriculum must also allow space for teachers to exercise autonomy in selecting from a broader range of texts and authors, so that students are able to see themselves in the curriculum, as well as be exposed to a wide range of perspectives that serve to broaden their horizons.

We believe the curriculum can better promote a wider range of literary voices while retaining core texts. Alongside the continued study of Shakespeare and 19th century literature, students should have the opportunity to explore a more diverse array of authors from the British Isles without adding to the mandatory volume of content. We also recommend reviewing the specified amounts and types of poetry studied to reduce prescription and encourage more flexibility in the poetry studied.

[198] DfE (2025) - A level time series
[199] Penguin books UK and Runnymede trust (2021) - Lit in Colour; Dee, T.S., & Penner, E.K. (2017) - The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance
[200] DfE (2013) - GCSE English Literature: subject content and assessment objectives

In addition, we note that this ambition could be supported in a number of additional ways, such as exemplification resources (such as those produced by Oak National Academy) and encouraging publishers and exam boards to continue to offer a wide selection of texts and accompanying materials.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures that the English curriculum sets out a clearer purpose, with more clarity and specificity at each key stage, including clarifying the distinction between English and literacy. This should include more clearly drawing out curriculum requirements for speaking and listening, as well as Drama. In particular, more clarity and specificity at Key Stage 3 should improve coherence between primary and secondary.
    - To support this, we recommend that the Government introduce an oracy framework to support practice and to complement the existing frameworks for reading and writing.[201]
- Reviews grammatical content to determine what content should be re-sequenced to later key stages, and what content should be removed entirely at Key Stage 2 to enable a greater focus on grammar in use rather than grammar in theory.
- Replaces the current GPS test with an amended test, which retains some elements of the current GPS test but with new tasks to better assess composition and application of grammar and punctuation.
    - Once the new test is established in schools, the DfE may wish to consider whether the role of the test in accountability should remain as stands, or whether any changes, such as including the new test in headline measures, should be explored.
- Introduces a diagnostic test in English, to be taken in Year 8, with the aim of supporting teachers to identify and address any areas of weakness before gaps widen further.
- Makes significant changes to the Key Stage 4 English Programme of Study and the GCSE English Language subject content, introducing greater clarity of purpose to focus English Language more clearly on the nature and expression of language, and to support critical analysis of a wider variety of text types and genres, including multi-modal and ephemeral text types.

[201] DfE (2023) - The reading framework; DfE (2025) - The writing framework

- Reviews the genres specified in the English Key Stage 4 Programme of Study and GCSE English Literature subject content to ensure that students continue to study texts drawn from the recognised body of English literature (including the expectation of at least one play by Shakespeare, a selection of poetry, fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards, and at least one 19th century novel), and that they also benefit from studying texts drawn from the full breadth of our literary heritage, including more diverse and representative texts. This should not increase the volume of content.

## Drama

- Drama is a statutory part of the English curriculum from Key Stages 1 to 4.
- At Key Stage 4, the statutory entitlement to study an arts subject includes Drama, as a standalone subject separate from English. GCSE Drama take-up was 13% in 2009/10 and 7% 2024/25. Take-up of the Speech and Drama pathway within the Performing Arts Technical Award was 2% in 2015/16 and 2% in 2024/25.
- In 2024/25, 57% of state-funded schools had entries into the GCSE qualification and 21% in the Technical Award. Overall, 74% of state-funded schools offered Drama.
- A Level Drama entries made up 2% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 1% in 2023/24.

Drama has strong links to oracy and presenting skills and provides an important introduction to the performing arts. It is a valuable part of a broad and balanced curriculum that builds students' confidence and prepares them for later life.[202]

The current English curriculum content was last updated in 2013, which significantly reduced the amount of Drama content within the Key Stage 1 to 4 curriculum. This was criticised at the time for not recognising Drama as a discipline in its own right.[203] Responses to our Call for Evidence argued that the resulting lack of clarity and specificity in the requirements for Drama means that it is not clear how the subject should be taught, what essential knowledge and skills pupils should acquire or what outcomes are expected at the end of each key stage.

[202] Oracy Education Commission (2024) - We need to talk
[203] Department for Education consultation response (2013) - Reforming the national curriculum in England

The Key Stage 1 and 2 Programmes of Study require all pupils to participate in and gain knowledge, skills and understanding associated with the artistic practice of Drama.[204] We heard that, in primary schools, drama and performance tend to be strongly valued and practised.

Teaching time for Drama at Key Stage 3 has remained at broadly 3% of total teaching time, which is around one fifth of the teaching time for English (which has ranged from 13% to 15%).[205] At Key Stage 3, students are expected to learn how the work of dramatists is communicated effectively through performance and how to improvise, rehearse and perform plays. Evidence from Ofsted suggests that, in most secondary schools, Drama is taught separately from English at Key Stage 3 and is usually grouped with other performing arts subjects rather than with English.[206] However, we have heard that schools are filling the current national curriculum gap with their own Drama curricula because of a lack of detail in the Key Stage 3 English Programme of Study. This can be positive in terms of enabling access to Drama, and in many cases may reflect outstanding, innovative practice. However, it may also mean that the quality and quantity of Key Stage 3 Drama provision vary, especially for students who do not experience it as a discrete subject, and it may not always be preparing them well for GCSE. This is felt to be deterring students both from taking the GCSE and from progressing to A Level, with A Level Drama having seen a significant decline in entries over recent years.[207]

We therefore recommend that Drama has its own discrete section within the English Programme of Study at Key Stage 3 to set out expectations more clearly and ensure equitable access to Drama education. Some additional specificity about Drama should also be added to the Key Stage 1 and 2 English Programmes of Study, setting out existing Drama content more clearly to build solid foundations and support transition to Key Stage 3.

Drama has relatively low take-up at GCSE and entries have declined in recent years,[208] whilst take-up of the Speech and Drama pathway within the Performing Arts Technical Award[209] has remained relatively stable. These trends are often attributed to the introduction of the EBacc, although evidence for this is mixed. Other factors are likely to also be at play, such as the supply of specialist secondary teachers.[210]

GCSE Drama should allow students to perform, devise and respond to drama and theatre; the current GCSE subject content reflects this. However, Call for Evidence

[204] DfE (2014) - National curriculum in England: English programmes of study
[205] DfE (2025) - Teaching time Key Stage 3-4
[206] Ofsted (2024) - Telling the story: the English education subject report - GOV.UK
[207] DfE (2025) - A level time series
[208] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence: (Curriculum subject trends over time); DfE (2025) - Pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Subject entries 2024/25
[209] There is also a Dance pathway in the Performing Arts Technical Award, which is reported separately: Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence: (Curriculum subject trends over time); DfE (2025) - Pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Subject entries 2024/25
[210] DfE (2025) - Initial teacher training census

submissions argued that there is currently too much theoretical content and assessment in the GCSE and too much written assessment, so that the focus on creating and devising works and practical performance is insufficient. Knowledge of practical skills such as performing and production are assessed partly through a written exam (worth 40% of the GCSE); and although 60% of Drama is assessed through non-exam assessment, a significant proportion of this non-exam assessment can be written (although this is, to some extent, the choice of the school).[211]

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Updates the Key Stage 3 English Programme of Study to include a discrete section on Drama. This should include more detail to provide greater clarity about expectations for performing, creating and responding to dramatic works. Greater specificity about Drama should be added to the Key Stage 1 and 2 English Programmes of Study, aiming to build solid foundations and support transition to Key Stage 3.
- Reviews the subject content for GCSE Drama, assessment methods and the balance of assessment to ensure that the qualification is up to date, suited to the discipline and enables progression to further study and careers in drama and theatre.

## Geography

- Geography is a statutory foundation subject from Key Stages 1 to 3.
- At Key Stage 4, there is an entitlement to study a humanities subject, including Geography. GCSE Geography take up was 26% in 2009/10 and 41% in 2024/25.
- In 2024/25, 89% of state-funded schools entered students for GCSE Geography.
- A Level Geography entries made up 4% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 4% in 2023/24.

Geography has undergone significant improvement in recent years and is now widely acknowledged and valued, not only by the sector and subject experts, but also by the

[211] For the NEA, alongside performance, students have to produce a portfolio (a 'devising log') which can be audio, visual, written, or a mix of these. This can mean that up to 70% of the total marks for GCSE Drama, when combining the examined and non-examined assessment, can be awarded for written material. Ofqual (2017) - GCSE Subject Level Conditions for Drama

public.[212] The real-world focus of the Geography curriculum is one of its key strengths, allowing young people to gain significant insights into contemporary world issues and evaluate potential solutions to pressing global challenges.[213] As such, the subject remains popular in terms of take-up for both GCSE and A Level and, as Ofsted observes, teaching is now 'more ambitious and better represents the distinctive nature of the subject'.[214]

It is important that these improvements are maintained. However, the Review heard of some limited areas for improvement. Responses to the Call for Evidence, engagement with subject bodies, sector experts and research reports have shown that some GCSE subject content in Geography is overly dense and repetitive, with some that is duplicated and outdated. There is repetition in certain topics (for example hazards, ecosystems and development), limiting opportunities for deeper understanding of key geographical concepts, processes and interconnections. We therefore recommend light-touch attention to the Geography Programme of Study and GCSE subject content to remove unnecessary repetition and update content to support greater use of contemporary, local and representative case studies and contexts.

Geography teachers have highlighted the importance of pupils developing core geographical skills - particularly geospatial, decision-making and green skills.[215] When planned effectively, high-quality fieldwork offers a 'real world' opportunity for students to build disciplinary capabilities and subject understanding in Geography, with fieldwork enquiry also opening doors to the development of wider skills such as data collection, analysis and problem-solving.[216] Despite these benefits, we have heard that fieldwork is inconsistently provided, particularly at GCSE, and this risks a significant skills gap for students when they progress to further study. This leads to missed opportunities, with some students not experiencing the purposeful, hands-on study that reflects how geographers collect and evaluate data and reach conclusions in their work.

We recommend light-touch review of current fieldwork requirements in Geography to explore how they are integrated across key stages, with a particular focus on GCSE subject content and assessment. This recommendation does not propose adding to existing requirements. Rather, it aims to clarify and strengthen how fieldwork is embedded within the curriculum, showing how it connects to other geographical skills and knowledge. Changes should remain proportionate. Great care should be taken not to inadvertently create access problems for socio-economically disadvantaged students based on geographical location or the potential costs associated with fieldwork trips and

[212] YouGov (2025) - How important is it to teach Geography at secondary school?
[213] Royal Geographical Society (2024) - Response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review.
[214] Ofsted (2023) - Getting our bearings: Geography Subject Report
[215]The United Nations Industrial Development Organization defines 'green skills' as the 'knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society'. See: UNIDO (2022) - What are green skills?
[216] Geographical Association (2024) - The importance of fieldwork

resources.[217] Any amendments should not imply fieldwork involving costly, far-afield trips. Instead, any changes should highlight that effective fieldwork can be delivered through, for example, local visits, and that schools can be supported through additional guidance and initiatives.[218]

The current Geography curriculum has notable gaps in relation to climate change. Responses to the Call for Evidence highlighted strong support from subject experts and young people for greater attention to this in the Geography curriculum.[219] The climate crisis is the most significant environmental challenge of modern times and, given that climate and weather are anchored in the existing Geography curriculum, it is essential that the Geography curriculum embeds climate education and sustainability appropriately across the key stages. In addition to the presently scant mention in the curriculum, the present overall purpose of study in the national curriculum does not explicitly identify climate change as a key concept. This has not prevented schools from teaching climate-related content but integrating it successfully has depended largely on the initiative of individual teachers or school leaders.[220] The purpose of study in the national curriculum should be amended to ensure explicit wording, empowering the next generation of geographers to understand and tackle climate change through suitable climate education.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Makes minor refinements to the Geography Programmes of Study and GCSE subject content to respond to the issues identified, including by:
    - Refining content to support progression better to further study, deepen children and young people's understanding of key geographical concepts, make content more relevant and inclusive, and remove unnecessary repetition across topics.
    - Embedding disciplinary knowledge more explicitly at Key Stage 3, such as geographical enquiry, spatial reasoning, use of digital tools, human

[217] Child Poverty Action Group (2025) - Back-to-school but blocked from learning – secondary pupils excluded by costs
[218] Such as the National Education Nature Park, which already supports schools in embedding geospatial and environmental skills through fieldwork projects.
[219] Geographical Association (2024) - Response to Review of Curriculum and Assessment
[220] The above UCL survey found that, of teachers and headteachers who reported participating in professional development related to climate change and sustainability, the most commonly reported type of professional development was 'self-taught' (70.5%). UCL Institute of Education (2023) - Teaching climate change and sustainability: A survey of teachers in England.

geography and use of evidence, to ensure all children and young people have access to high-quality geographical education.

    - Clarifying and reinforcing requirements for fieldwork to demonstrate its role more effectively in supporting content and the developing of disciplinary knowledge, ensuring changes remain proportionate and inclusive.
- Embeds climate change and sustainability more explicitly across different key stages, including across the physical geography, geographical applications and human geography sections of the curriculum, ensuring early, coherent, and more detailed engagement with climate education. This should be done without risking curriculum overload.

## History

- History is a statutory foundation subject from Key Stages 1 to 3.
- At Key Stage 4, there is an entitlement to study a humanities subject, including History. GCSE History take-up was 31% in 2009/10 and 42% in 2024/25.
- In 2024/25, 90% of state-funded schools entered students for GCSE History.
- A Level History entries made up 6% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 5% in 2023/24.

History is a popular subject, and we heard through the Call for Evidence that the History curriculum is broadly working well. The 2013 curriculum reforms sought to strengthen children and young people's chronological understanding, avoid repeating content between key stages, and address evidence indicating that History was often taught as a series of disjointed topics.[221] GCSE entries for History have increased in recent years, at least in part likely as a result of including History in the EBacc and Progress 8.[222] Uptake at A Level has stayed within a consistent range during the same time-frame.[223]

Even so, there are clear areas for improvement. At Key Stages 1 to 3, feedback from our Call for Evidence suggested a need to enhance students' knowledge of how historians study the past, and how they construct historical claims, arguments and accounts.[224] The Review has heard calls for the curriculum to provide more space for exploring and

[221] Ofsted (2011) - History for all: History subject report
[222] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence: (Curriculum subject trends over time); DfE (2025) - Pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Subject entries 2024/25
[223] DfE (2025) - A level time series
[224] Ofsted (2023) - Rich encounters with the past: History subject report

embedding these disciplinary skills which are essential for further study.[225] The ability to assess varying sources of information critically also plays a role in supporting wider life skills, such as media literacy. We therefore recommend the Key Stage 1 to 3 Programmes of Study should update and enhance the requirement for disciplinary understanding, without adding excessive content.

We also believe there should be clearer messages about what is and what is not statutory in relation to History at Key Stages 1 to 3, and where flexibility exists in a given framework. For example, our engagement has highlighted that extensive lists and elements in the Programmes of Study at Key Stages 2 and 3 make the curriculum appear overloaded, with teachers feeling pressure to teach all these separate components in depth. In recommending greater clarity about and coherence between statutory and non-statutory content, we aim to support teachers (particularly non-specialists in History) to identify and navigate the optionality that exists across the History curriculum. Further clarification should also support teachers to decide whether to treat elements in depth or at a high level. Where applicable, this should be achieved by minor redrafting of content. These changes should not detract from the historical and chronological understanding that is currently required across curriculum topics nor reduce the subject's rigour.

The Review has received evidence which suggests that GCSE History requires significant review. There have been widespread calls to tackle content overload. The majority of History teachers would like to see the level of prescribed content at GCSE reduced significantly.[226] At present, they are required to teach five distinct components,[227] with significant detail set out for each one. A review of the content requirements within each component, and how they interact and overlap, may allow clearer connections to be made and, in turn, identify where content could be streamlined.

In addition, the Review understands that pressures to cover the current content at GCSE may be leading to a disproportionate focus on rote learning to pass exams rather than ensuring that students gain a comprehensive grounding in important disciplinary and subject skills. As such, we recommend assessment objectives and approaches are revisited to ensure they better encourage the knowledge and application of disciplinary rigour.

History as a subject covers a wide array of eras, contexts and cultures. We have heard that many teachers would welcome clearer guidance and more examples to help them capitalise on existing flexibility, particularly when representing a wider range of perspectives in British history.[228] We suggest this is done by updating the aims and

[225] Historical Association (2024), Response to the Call for Evidence
[226] Social Market Foundation (2024) - Testing patience: Reducing the burden of the English school curriculum
[227] A thematic study, a period study, two depth studies and a study of the historic environment.
[228] The requirement is for British history to form a minimum of 40% of the assessed content over the full GCSE History course. However, sector organisations have challenged the division between, for example, 'British' and 'World' history and argued for a more inclusive approach which better recognises the

refreshing the non-statutory examples in the Programmes of Study across key stages and GCSE subject content.

Responses to the Call for Evidence made clear that exemplification should not involve replacing existing content. For example, it is essential that significant topics such as the Holocaust and the Second World War continue to be taught. Instead, exemplification should enrich the curriculum by introducing a broader mix of perspectives and connections across different times and places, deepening students' historical understanding. This should include analysis of a wide and diverse range of sources, including, where appropriate, a focus on local history to help students engage better with their local contexts. Such practice might be bolstered through exemplification resources, such as those published by Oak National Academy.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Adjusts the History Programmes of Study to:
  - Improve the understanding and application of disciplinary knowledge and skills through additions and amendments to the disciplinary terms used.
  - Clarify statutory and non-statutory content requirements to better support teachers in recognising and understanding the optionality that exists across Key Stages 1 to 3.
  - Support the wider teaching of History's inherent diversity, including through the analysis of a wide range of sources and, where appropriate, local history.
- Reviews GCSE History subject content and assessment (including assessment objectives) to:
  - Ensure understanding of disciplinary knowledge is advanced and concerns about overload are tackled.
  - Ensure that assessment is fit for purpose and aligned with the aims of the GCSE.

complexities and diversities of our national history. For example, Runnymede Trust (2012) - Making British Histories: Diversity and the National Curriculum'

## Languages

- Study of a foreign language, either modern or ancient, is compulsory at Key Stage 2. Study of a Modern Foreign Language (MFL) is compulsory at Key Stage 3.
- At Key Stage 4, there is an entitlement to study an MFL GCSE. Take-up in any MFL GCSE was 43% in 2009/10 and 44% in 2024/25.
    - GCSE French take-up was 25% in 2009/10 and 18% in 2024/25.
    - GCSE German take-up was 10% in 2009/10 and 5% in 2024/25.
    - GCSE Spanish take-up was 9% in 2009/10 and 19% in 2024/25.
    - In 2024/25, 75% of state-funded schools had GCSE entries in French, 32% in German and 74% in Spanish.
- GCSE Classical Greek and GCSE Biblical Hebrew take-up is consistently less than 1%. GCSE Latin take-up was 1% in 2012/13 and 1% in 2024/25. In 2024/25, 1% of state-funded schools had GCSE entries in Classical Greek or Biblical Hebrew; 7% had entries in GCSE Latin.
- A Level French entries made up 2% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 1% in 2023/24. A Level Spanish entries made up 1% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 1% in 2023/24. A Level German entries made up 0.6% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 0.3% in 2023/24.

The requirement to study a language at Key Stage 4 was removed in 2004,[229] and Figure 6. Modern Foreign Language GCSE uptake as a proportion of all pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 by year shows that between 2004/05 and 2011/12 take-up of GCSEs in MFL declined. Following the introduction of the EBacc (of which Languages, both modern and ancient, are a pillar), take-up of any MFL spiked initially and since plateaued. Looking at these trends, it is reasonable to assume that the introduction of the EBacc may have initially arrested a decline in take-up. As such, we have heard concerns that removing the EBacc may have a negative impact on take-up.

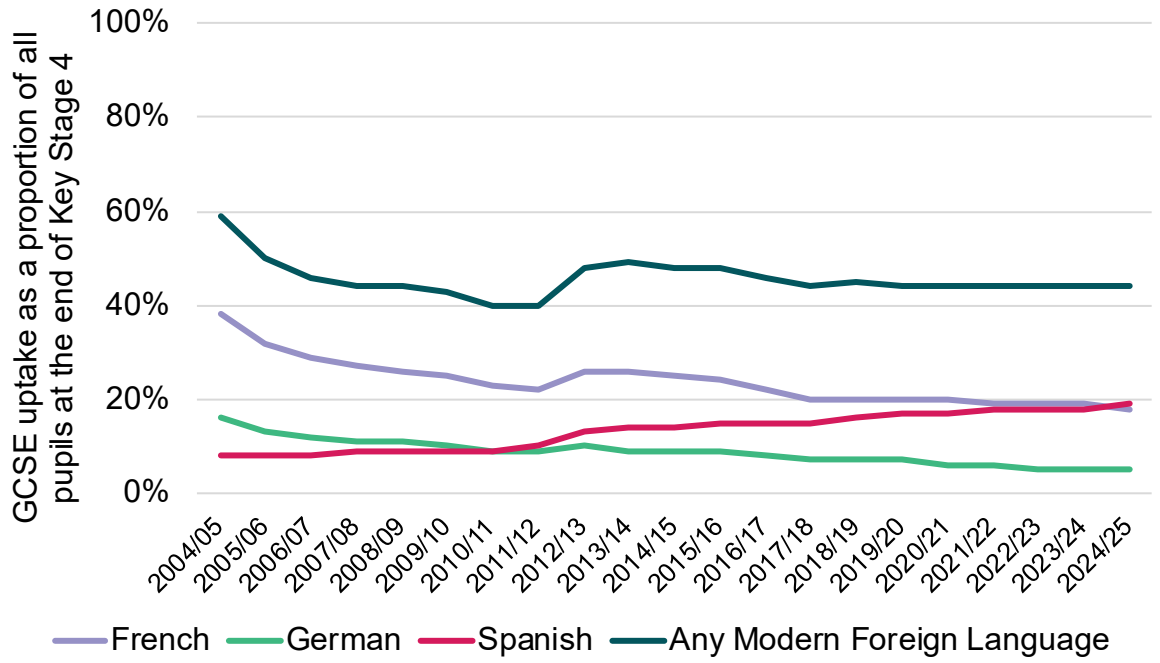
However, the continuing impact of the EBacc is less clear. GCSE take-up in French and German since 2009/10 has decreased for both languages, but take-up in Spanish has increased substantially, while take-up in ancient Languages has remained consistent.[230] We discuss the impact of removing the EBacc further later (see accountability). However, we consider that change to the Languages curriculum rather than to accountability

[229] Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies (MEITS) (2019) - Policy Briefing on Modern Languages Educational Policy in the UK

[230] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence: (Curriculum subject trends over time); DfE (2025) - Pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Subject entries 2024/25

measures is necessary to address concerns about take-up and, ultimately, to improve outcomes for young people.

**Figure 6. Modern Foreign Language GCSE uptake as a proportion of all pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 by year[231]**




In 2024/25, take-up of any MFL GCSE by disadvantaged students was 34% compared to 50% by those who were not disadvantaged.[232] Outcomes are comparatively lower than for other national curriculum subjects. Results data[233] and research[234] show that students who have similar prior attainment (that is, they achieved the expected standard or above in English and Maths at Key Stage 2) are less likely to achieve a GCSE grade 4 or above in French, German and Spanish than in English and Maths. Perceived difficulty and harsher grading have been cited as factors.[235] The DfE's recent reforms to French, German and Spanish GCSEs have sought to address this. The Review is aware, however, that these reforms are still in their infancy, with first teaching beginning in 2024/25 and first assessment not due until summer 2026. As such, it is too soon for the Review to comment on their impact and whether they have had the intended effect. The Review notes the importance of evaluating these changes following the first assessment.

A number of factors affecting the take-up and outcomes of Languages are beyond the scope of the Review. For example, we are aware of the challenges related to the workforce, with just 43% of initial teacher training recruitment targets being met for

[231] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Analytical annex)
[232] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[233] DfE (2025) - Key Stage 2 to 4 transition matrices GCSE subjects
[234] DfE (2025) - Inter-subject comparability in GCSEs and A levels in summer 2024
[235] FFT education datalab (2025) - Grading severity at Key Stage 4 in 2024

Modern Foreign Languages in 2024/25.[236] Teaching time is also a factor, with some primary pupils receiving less than 30 minutes a week[237] and many secondary students receiving less than two hours,[238] despite evidence showing more time is needed to make significant progress.[239] These factors need to be taken into account by the DfE when implementing any changes.

The Review's Call for Evidence received many responses focusing on the challenges with Languages at primary, with calls for reform at this stage to strengthen progression into secondary and improve outcomes at Key Stage 4 and beyond. There was a relatively prevalent view that introducing a statutory requirement to teach Languages from Key Stage 2 in 2014 had been a positive move in supporting the subject, but a number of concerns and gaps were identified with current provision in primary schools.

The Review recognises that a variety of factors, many of which fall outside its scope, contribute to inconsistencies in Languages provision at primary and outcomes across schools and regions. These include low subject knowledge among non-specialist teachers and little access to relevant professional development, as well as challenges in finding sufficient teaching time, noted above.[240] However, the curriculum could be strengthened to support better progression to Key Stages 3 and 4. The Review's recommendations recognise that some wider support will be needed to ensure that change is implemented effectively, for example, from Oak National Academy and the National Consortium for Languages Education (NCLE).[241]

Through the Call for Evidence and our broader engagement, the Review has heard that the current Key Stage 2 Languages Programme of Study is unclear about what constitutes the requirement to make 'substantial progress in one language'. Respondents emphasised that this is leading to inconsistent interpretations and delivery, resulting in varied teaching approaches and uneven outcomes across schools.

The Review also heard concerns that the transition between primary and secondary is challenging to do well. According to the British Council's 2024 Languages Trends survey, only 14% of English secondary schools said they could organise classes based on the languages pupils had studied at Key Stage 2.[242] The range of languages taught across different primary schools means that many secondary students have to repeat content

[236] DfE (2025) - Initial teacher training census
[237] British Council (2024) - Language Trends England 2024
[238] British Council (2023) - Language Trends England 2023
[239] For instance, FCDO provides 450 hours of training to get an adult from zero to C1 standard (a proficient user of that language) in French and German, and 1,200 hours of training to get from zero to C1 standard in Mandarin Chinese. See Council of Europe (2023) - Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
[240] Research in Primary Languages RiPL (2018) – White Paper on 'Primary Languages Policy in England – The Way Forward'
[241] National Consortium for Languages Education NCLE (2025) - National Consortium for Languages Education
[242] British Council (2024) - Language Trends England 2024

that they have already covered. Alternatively, they have to begin a new language from scratch in Year 7 (often alongside peers who already have some knowledge of that language), despite the fact that they have made progress in a different language up to Year 6. This is a key impediment to success in Languages education in England. It marks a notable point of difference with the majority of European countries that teach English as the main second language from early primary onwards.[243] However, we consider that the solutions required to implement this type of model would be very controversial (such as identifying a national second language), and we have been struck by the evidence that many other English-speaking nations face similar challenges with low take-up of Languages.[244]

Instead, to deal with the challenges about both the specificity of requirements and the transition between Key Stages 2 and 3, responses to the Call for Evidence showed strong support for a defined minimum core content within the Key Stage 2 Languages Programme of Study. This is backed up by polling published in the 2024 Language Trends Survey, with 80% of primary teachers in state schools in favour of a language-specific list of minimum vocabulary and grammar to be covered by the end of Key Stage 2.[245] The Review agrees that a minimum core content for French, German and Spanish would provide greater clarity and consistency, especially for non-specialist teachers. Covering commonly occurring phonics, vocabulary, and grammar, this should align closely with the content and teaching approaches at secondary and thus build more securely the foundations of knowledge for success at Key Stage 4 and beyond more securely. This should support a smoother transition into Key Stage 3. Primary schools could also use the core content for French, German and Spanish as an exemplar for provision in any other languages they may choose to teach. With a shared understanding of what constitutes 'substantial progress' in a language, secondary schools would be better equipped to build on students' prior learning.

According to the 2024 Languages Trends survey, over half of primary schools reported no contact with local secondaries regarding Languages provision.[246] While reviewing different means to support the transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3, the Review was interested to learn about the approach taken in Hackney, where the majority of schools in the borough focus on teaching a single language (Spanish) to ensure continuity and consistency from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4. The initiative also includes

[243] Eurostat (2025) - Foreign language learning statistics
[244] Canada: Statistics Canada (2023) - Number of students in elementary and secondary schools, by school type and program type Number of students in official languages programs, public elementary and secondary schools, by program type, grade and sex;
USA: Modern Language Association (2021) - Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education | Modern Language Association;
Australia: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority acara (2023) - Year 12 subject enrolments;
New Zealand has also seen a fall in non-native languages but an increase in native second languages such as Māori: Education Counts (2024) - School subject enrolment
[245] British Council (2024) - Language Trends England 2024
[246] British Council (2024) - Language Trends England 2024

an emphasis on inter-school relationships, teachers' professional development and close engagement with cultural institutions such as the Spanish Consejería de Educación.[247] Analysis of the 2024/25 GCSE entry data shows Hackney had the highest take-up of Spanish of all local authorities in England.[248] This does come at the expense of the study of other languages, with almost no take-up of German in 2025 and French take-up at approximately half of the regional and national average. Overall, however, take-up of a modern language in Hackney is much higher than the national average.

With little evidence of similar initiatives in other regions, the Review cannot conclusively determine the extent to which the single Language model alone has contributed to the increase in uptake. Nevertheless, many positive features have been brought about by the increased collaboration in Hackney, including closer communication between primary and secondary schools. The Review therefore sees an opportunity for local authorities, multi-academy trusts and schools to explore a coordinated, single-language approach to support transition.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Updates the Key Stage 2 Languages Programme of Study to include a clearly defined minimum core content for French, German and Spanish to standardise expectations about what 'substantial progress in one language' looks like.
- Should not make immediate changes to the new content of the GCSEs in French, German and Spanish but that the DfE should review the impact of these following the first exams in 2026.

We recommend that local authorities, multi-academy trusts and schools:

- Should explore the potential benefits of a coordinated approach in their local areas to the main language taught from Key Stage 2 through to Key Stage 4, taking account of their local context and priorities. The Government should look to encourage this activity where appropriate.

[247] Ministerio de Educación, Formación Profesional y Deportes (2025) - Consejería de Educación in the United Kingdom - Reino Unido

[248] The proportion of pupils taking Spanish is derived by taking the DfE (2025) - number of pupils taking Spanish in each local authority divided by the DfE (2025) - number of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 in each local authority.

## Maths

- Maths is a statutory core curriculum subject throughout Key Stages 1 to 4.
- At the end of Key Stage 2 in 2024/25, 74% of pupils met the expected standard in Maths.
- GCSE Maths take-up was 93% in 2009/10 and 90% in 2024/25.
- In 2024/25, 99% of state-funded schools entered students for GCSE Maths.
- A Level Maths entries made up 9% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 12% in 2023/24; for A Level Further Maths, it was 1% in 2009/10 and 2% in 2023/24. There were also over 15,000 entries into Core Maths in 2024/25, increasing from under 3,000 entries in 2015/16, when it was first taken.[249]

There is much to celebrate within Maths education in England. Young people in England perform relatively strongly in Maths relative to other jurisdictions.[250] Feedback from the Call for Evidence suggests that the curriculum is rigorous, ambitious and prepares many young people for success in further study or the world of work. This is reflected in the uptake of A Level Maths which, since 2013/14, has become the most popular A Level, with numbers nearing 100,000 in 2023/24.[251] It is important that we recognise the significant progress made in Maths education in England over recent decades, and that our recommendations maintain and build on the many strengths detailed in this report.

However, for a proportion of young people, the current system is not working well. Many lower attainers are being left behind and the proportion of students who do not achieve level 2 in Maths by age 16 (as indicated at GCSE by grade 4), and who still do not reach level 2 by age 19, remains far too high. This is significant because - as well as supporting daily life - level 2 Maths is typically required for access to further study and employment. Latest data shows that 31% of all students did not secure level 2 by age 16.[252] Table 4 shows that learners who are eligible for free school meals are disproportionately likely not to secure level 2 in Maths by age 16 or 19 when compared with their peers who are not eligible (focusing on the 2018/19 cohort, the latest cohort of learners not affected by COVID-19 related grading changes at both age 16 and 19).

[249] MEI (2025) - Summary of Core Maths entries and results August 2025
[250] DfE (2023) - PISA 2022: national report for England
[251] DfE (2025) - Entries and Results - A level and AS by subject and student characteristics
[252] DfE (2025) - Attainment by characteristics

**Table 4. Percentage of learners not achieving level 2 Maths by age 16 and 19, split by FSM status, 2018/19[253]**

| | Age 16 | Age 19 |
|---|---|---|
| All pupils | 31% | 24% |
| Free school meals | 54% | 45% |
| No free school meals | 28% | 20% |

The proportion of students who achieve level 2 over the course of the 16-19 resit process continues to be far too small (see 16-19 Maths and English). This must not be allowed to continue, and we believe scope exists to make changes pre-16 to help resolve this.

The Review considers the curriculum to have an appropriately strong focus on Maths across all key stages. Parents and carers broadly agree. The 2024 National Parent Survey found that 76% of them thought that schools have about the right amount of focus on English, Maths and Science.[254] However, feedback from our evidence gathering suggests that this time is not always well spent (as discussed below) and that pupils' experience of Maths pre-16 can contribute to the high proportion not securing grade 4 at GCSE. Many of these issues can start at Key Stage 1, go unresolved at Key Stage 2, and persist into Key Stage 3.

Through extensive engagement with subject experts, and through drawing comparisons with other high-performing jurisdictions, we have determined that the overall volume of content in the Maths curriculum is appropriate, but we remain concerned that too much is introduced too quickly, followed by excessive repetition in later years and stages.[255] As a result, pupils often have limited opportunity to engage deeply with foundational mathematical concepts and have insufficient time for more challenging, non-routine problem solving that such concepts underpin. This can lead to only a superficial understanding of the fundamentals, preventing sufficient opportunity for them to secure mathematical fluency and apply their knowledge in meaningful contexts.[256]

The Review believes there should be a stronger focus on developing fluency[257] in the fundamentals of number at Key Stage 1 and that space should be made within the number domain to prioritise this. Evidence suggests that understanding in number is

[253] DfE (2025) - Attainment by characteristics, based on cohort of learners reaching academic age 18 in 2018/19, the latest cohort of learners not affected by COVID-19-related grading changes. Data for the latest cohort is also available in this source.
[254] Parentkind (2024) - The National Parent Survey 2024
[255] Maths Horizons (2025) - How England should reform maths education for the age of AI
[256] Maths Horizons (2025) - How England should reform maths education for the age of AI
[257] See NCTEM for definition and explanation of the elements of number fluency: National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (2025) -The Five Big Ideas at Primary – Fluency

one of the most critical elements of Maths for preparation for later life.[258] Without secure foundations in number, pupils are restricted in their ability to reason in everyday contexts. Yet, at Key Stage 1, some pupils do not build a deep understanding of numbers and their composition, a shortfall which can often impede access later to other mathematical concepts. We therefore recommend placing greater emphasis on fluency in number in Key Stage 1, with a particular focus on developing fluency in number bonds and addition and subtraction in a range of contexts. This enhanced focus should be integrated alongside other content taught at this stage, such as shape and measurement.

Given the foundational importance of number fluency, during these years and beyond, it is essential that knowledge gaps in this area are diagnosed as early as possible. While we do not recommend reintroducing the statutory national tests at the end of Key Stage 1, we encourage all schools to administer the non-statutory test for Maths. Doing so provides teachers at Key Stage 2 with a greater understanding of which pupils will need further support to master the foundational concepts.

To enable this increased focus on the fundamentals of number in Key Stage 1, and to support learning in later years, we believe there is a strong case for resequencing the Maths curriculum whilst protecting curriculum time or content. This would involve spacing content more evenly and appropriately across key stages, supporting pupils and students to develop fluency and allow for non-routine problem solving that stretches all pupils in using fundamental concepts. This is particularly important across Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, where we have heard that the breadth of topics at Key Stage 2 has resulted in significant challenges for primary to secondary transition.

We believe the priority at Key Stage 2 should be ensuring all pupils build competence in multiplicative reasoning and problem-solving. Multiplicative reasoning includes secure understanding of multiplication and division scaling, repeated addition, arrays, and whole number rates. Appropriate stretch and challenge for all pupils, including the highest attainers, should come primarily through reasoning and problem solving. A strong foundation in number, combined with an expectation that all pupils have the chance to apply what they know through problem-solving and reasoning, should support transition better.

Greater fluency in number at Key Stages 1 and 2 should better prepare pupils to be able to reason proportionally and algebraically, the bulk of which we think should be introduced in Key Stage 3, consistent with the staggered expansion in the range of topics introduced in other high-performing systems internationally.[259] Analysis of past GCSE Maths scripts indicates that students who do not have a basic understanding to reason multiplicatively or proportionally rarely achieve grade 4 at GCSE. This means that, despite receiving 12 years of Maths education, too many struggle to demonstrate these

[258] Ofsted (2025) - Research review series: mathematics
[259] OECD (2024) - An Evolution of Mathematics Curriculum

mathematical competencies.[260] It is essential, therefore, that the progression from number composition and counting through to additive, multiplicative, proportional and algebraic reasoning is made more explicit and intentional across key stages. We are confident that this, in addition to being able to tackle non-routine problems, will be better prepare students for GCSE exams.

Improving the sequence of when certain mathematical concepts are introduced so that pupils can master them more deeply would require adjustments to both non-statutory Key Stage 1 assessments and the Key Stage 2 national tests to reflect such content amendments. We recommend retaining the Multiplication Tables Check (MTC) in Year 4 as an important indicator of multiplicative competence. The DfE and Standards and Testing Agency (STA) should explore ways in which it can refine access arrangements for pupils who find the MTC inaccessible in its current format (see primary assessment).

To support as many young people as possible to progress through secondary education and succeed in GCSE Maths, we recommend introducing a diagnostic test in Year 8 (see secondary assessment). The purpose is to support teachers in identifying areas of weakness in order to deal with gaps in good time before students progress to Key Stage 4.

It is imperative that students who fail to attain a grade 4 at GCSE at age 16 are given the opportunity to achieve this standard by the time they reach age 19. Table 4 shows that the current arrangements for resits are not fit for purpose in achieving this. As a result, we are making recommendations to improve their chances of success (see 16-19 Maths and English).

As discussed, pupils have been clear that they want the curriculum to provide a more secure grounding in financial literacy (see financial education). As such, we are keen to make the link that exists elsewhere in the curriculum between Maths and financial education more explicit, but we do not expect Maths to be the primary home for financial education.[261] We consider it is placed more appropriately elsewhere in the curriculum, particularly in Citizenship, where there is greater scope to explore practical financial concepts in real-life contexts. However, students should be introduced to the relevant mathematical concepts in Maths first, before being exposed to them in other subjects, and the curriculum should be sequenced to this end.

[260] OCR (2024) - Striking the Balance: A review of 11 – 16 curriculum and assessment in England
[261] Maths Horizons (2025) - Financial Literacy Report

## Recommendations[262]

We recommend that the Government:

- Retains the amount and type of content in the Key Stage 1 to 3 curriculum, but re-sequences it so that topics are introduced in such a way that pupils can master them deeply, with opportunities for more complex problem-solving in each area, and reduce repetition in later years.
- Ensures that Maths should be the subject in which pupils are exposed to mathematical concepts for the first time and the curriculum is sequenced as such. These concepts should then be applied in different contexts, where appropriate, in other subjects - for example, aspects of financial education in Citizenship.[263]
- Ensures that the Standards and Testing Agency (STA) works with DfE to refine the current non-statutory Maths test at Key Stage 1 to reflect any updates to the Maths curriculum. Alongside this, the DfE should consider ways in which it can encourage more schools to use it.
- Ensures that the STA works with the DfE to redesign Key Stage 2 assessments minimally to reflect a re-sequenced curriculum and include a stronger focus on mental arithmetic and reasoning.
- Introduces a diagnostic test in Maths, to be taken in Year 8, with the aim of supporting teachers to identify and deal with any weakness before students progress to Key Stage 4.

## Music

- Music is a statutory foundation subject from Key Stage 1 to 3.
- At Key Stage 4, the entitlement to study an arts subject includes Music. GCSE Music take-up was 7% in 2009/10 and 5% in 2024/25. Technical Award take-up was 1% in 2015/16 and 2% in 2024/25.
- In 2024/25, 57% of state-funded schools had entries into GCSE Music, 19% into the Music Technical Award and 3% in the Music Technology Technical Award.
- A Level Music entries made up 1% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 1% in 2023/24.

[262] For recommendations relating to Maths at 16–19, see 16–19 Maths and English.
[263] For example: a student should not be exposed to compound interest during their financial education in Citizenship without first having been introduced to in Maths.

The proportion of students entering GCSE Music has declined in recent years. Although entries into the Technical Award in Music have increased over the same period, the overall picture is one of a slight decline in entries to Music qualifications at Key Stage 4.[264] This is often attributed to the introduction of the EBacc in 2010/11 and the subsequent introduction of the Attainment 8 and Progress 8 measures but, especially given the growth in Technical Award take-up we cannot be certain that performance measures are solely responsible.[265]

Evidence of inequitable access to and success in Music is substantial. A 2020 Education and Policy Institute (EPI) report identified Music as having the highest disadvantage attainment gap of any subject at GCSE.[266] In addition, 61% of schools with the highest proportion of disadvantaged students had no entries for GCSE Music in 2024/25, compared to 10% of schools with the lowest proportion. Taking GCSEs and Technical Awards together, 30% of schools with the highest levels of deprivation did not have entries in Music at Key Stage 4 in 2024/25, compared to 7% with the lowest levels.[267] This suggests that although the Technical Award reduces the access gap between disadvantaged students and their peers, a significant gap still remains.

This inequity may be driven by the benefit that students from advantaged backgrounds gain from additional, out-of-classroom instrumental tuition. Nearly three times as many children from the highest-income households take part in music classes outside school (32%) compared to the lowest-income households (11%).[268] We have heard from stakeholders that success in GCSE Music relies on the ability to read music, a skill usually developed through learning and playing a musical instrument. Although GCSE specifications do not explicitly require students to play a musical instrument, the performance component requires them to 'interpret and communicate musical ideas with technical control and expression'. This can be achieved through 'playing or singing music, improvising, or realising music using music technology'. The subject content is specific in its expectations regarding reading music, requiring students to 'demonstrate knowledge of…musical language'.[269] These expectations clearly suggest that the ability to read music (and therefore to play an instrument) is strongly advantageous. However, omnibus survey results show that 29% of primary school pupils and 26% of Key Stage 3

[264] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence: (Curriculum subject trends over time); DfE (2025) - Pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Subject entries 2024/25
[265] FFT education datalab (2023) - What has Progress 8 done for the creative subjects?; Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence: (Curriculum subject trends over time); DfE (2025) - Pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Subject entries 2024/25
[266] EPI (2020) - Education in England: Annual Report 2020
[267] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[268] Social Mobility Commission (2019) - Extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility
[269] DfE (2015) - GCSE music

students had not received any musical instrument teaching at school, and 31% of primary schools do not use sheet music in music lessons or in extra-curricular music activities.[270]

Technical Awards should provide an alternative Key Stage 4 pathway, but stakeholders have expressed the view that recent reforms to the Music Technical Award have resulted in a qualification which overlaps considerably with the GCSE in terms of content, is too prescriptive, has heavy writing demands, and is more constrained in terms of performance.

These disparities in access to Music education have often been attributed to inequality of resources, both between and beyond schools. We note that, since 2012, the Government has provided funding for a national network of 43 Music Hub partnerships across England.[271] We also note that, in March 2025, the Government announced its intention to launch a National Centre for Arts and Music Education.[272] This is welcome. However, given the clear evidence of inequality of access to Music tuition and its impact on progression beyond Key Stage 3, we believe more needs to be done, especially to ensure reach and coverage of this support. Music is statutory in the national curriculum to the end of Key Stage 3, and the curriculum and its implementation must therefore support potential progression to Key Stage 4 qualifications through within-school provision. We therefore recommend that the Government explores ways to better optimise its investment in Music education to support the teaching and learning of musical instruments and the reading of music to ensure equitable access to and progression in Music education.

In addition, we believe some changes to curriculum content, qualification pathways and assessment modes should be made throughout Key Stages 1 to 4 to increase the quality of musical education and improve equity of access. Through our Call for Evidence, we heard that there is a lack of clarity about the purpose of the Key Stage 1 to 3 curricula.[273] In particular, the language of the Programmes of Study is described as vague, referring to general skills such as ‘confidence’ rather than to subject-specific outcomes. This means that endpoints are not clear, particularly when the subject is taught by non-specialists. In addition, some of the terminology is cited as lending itself to a narrow interpretation of genres and repertoires (for example, the reference to ‘the musical canon’).

Ofsted’s subject report echoed this.[274] It found a lack of specificity in the Music Programmes of Study about the fundamentals of musical understanding and reported

[270] DfE (2023) - PPLP omnibus surveys 2022 to 2023: March 2023
[271] These offer a range of services to support schools, including instrument tuition to individuals, groups and whole classes; instrument loans; and teacher CPD: DfE (2025) - Subject hubs
[272] This will promote arts education, support teaching through a CPD offer and support partnerships between schools and arts organisations: DfE and The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP (2025) - Young people to benefit from creative education boost
[273] DfE (2021) - National curriculum in England: music programmes of study
[274] Ofsted (2023) - Striking the right note: the music subject report

that the curriculum is often interpreted by teachers as a list of disconnected genres and composers. This encourages breadth, but not depth, of study. Ofsted observed that it is important for progression that pupils can build incrementally on their knowledge and technical ability. The Cultural Learning Alliance has also noted that musicians need to build a subject-specific knowledge of theory, notation and instrumental techniques.[275]

We heard clearly from Call for Evidence responses and sector experts that, without robust foundations having been being built by the end of Key Stage 3, GCSE Music becomes inaccessible to most students unless they have external or extra-curricular tuition. We therefore recommend specifying the core knowledge and skills that should be taught in Music from Key Stages 1 to 3 to create a better sequenced and more equitable curriculum. This should ensure that all students have a more solid foundation in Music by the end of Key Stage 3, equipping more young people to study it at Key Stage 4. This should provide clarity for teachers, and especially for non-specialists, on how to build musical understanding, rather than taking an isolated, topic-by-topic approach.

In terms of Key Stage 4 pathways, students generally perform well in Music, with 76% achieving a grade 4 or above, and 33% achieving a grade 7 or above.[276] Some Call for Evidence submissions reported concerns that GCSE content is overly theoretical, but further exploration with subject experts suggests that reducing theoretical content may dilute the standard of the qualification and would risk removing essential subject knowledge, making it less comparable to other GCSEs and less suitable as a progression route.

However, subject experts did note challenges in relation to the GCSE assessment criteria, modes and requirements. Stakeholders raised concerns that, in the musical performance assessment, although there is a strong focus on technical accuracy, there is not enough focus on other skills such as musicality and fluency. They also raised concerns that the written component of the exam is overly rigid. We therefore recommend revising GCSE subject content and assessment objectives to ensure they are suited to the discipline, including considering whether the requirement to ‘demonstrate musical knowledge’ should be woven as a thread throughout the three other core areas (performance, composition and appraisal) rather than being defined as a separate objective.

Finally, we recommend that, concurrently, the purpose and aims of the Key Stage 4 Music Technical Award are reviewed to clarify its distinct purpose in comparison to the GCSE. Consideration should also be given to the extent to which the structure and content of the current qualification reflect the purpose and aims, to ensure that

[275] Cultural Learning Alliance (2025) - What if we think of the arts as knowledge-rich?
[276] DfE (2025) - Key Stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25

Key Stage 4 pathways are suitable for different cohorts and facilitate progression to further study or careers in the music industry.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Revises the content of the Programmes of Study for Key Stages 1 to 3 to ensure a curriculum pathway which gives all pupils a rigorous foundation in musical understanding and enables broader access to further study at Key Stage 4. This could be achieved by:
    - Revisiting the purpose and aims, ensuring that they better reflect intended outcomes.
    - Adding some further specificity, without increasing volume, to clarify how pupils should progress in the three pillars of musical understanding (technical, constructive and expressive), and to ensure that a range of genres and repertoires can be covered.
- Reviews the Music GCSE and Technical Award concurrently to ensure their purposes are both clear and distinct and that qualification content and assessment meet these aims. As part of this, the Government should consider:
    - GCSE assessment objectives, modes and requirements, and whether these are suited to the discipline.
    - The extent to which the most recent reforms to Technical Awards have effectively changed the purpose and suitability of the Music Technical Award, and whether this qualification is still fit for purpose or requires further adjustments.
- Explores ways to better optimise its investment in Music education to support the teaching and learning of musical instruments and the reading of music to ensure equitable access to, and progression in, Music education.

## Physical Education (PE), including Dance

## PE

- PE is a statutory foundation subject for all pupils from Key Stage 1 to 4.
- At Key Stage 4, PE must be taught to all students, and some will choose to take a qualification in it. Take-up of the optional GCSE in PE was 19% in 2009/10 and

11% in 2024/25. Take-up of the Sports Studies or Sports Science Technical Award was 7% in 2015/16 and 11% in 2024/25.[277]

- In 2024/25, 55% of state-funded schools had entries into GCSE PE, 55% had entries into the Sports Studies Technical Award and 10% had entries into the Sports Science Technical Award.
- A Level PE entries made up 3% of all A Level entries in 2009/10 and 2% in 2023/24.

A report from UK Chief Medical Officers on the guidelines for physical activity notes that regular physical activity contributes to cardiovascular fitness and healthy weight and is also associated with improved learning, attainment and better mental health. A secure grounding in PE at school is important for developing children's skills and confidence to be physically active, ultimately reducing the risk of coronary heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes and non-physical issues such as social isolation.[278]

Schools are strongly encouraged to deliver a minimum of 2 hours of PE per week.[279] Many schools meet this ambition at Key Stages 1 to 3, but evidence suggests that this drops off as students enter Key Stage 4. Teaching time for PE as a percentage of all hours taught has remained broadly stable in Key Stages 3 and 4 since 2011/12.[280] Despite the subject's significant benefits, we heard through our Call for Evidence that, nationally, PE varies in quality. This is particularly concerning given that, for many pupils, their participation in physical activity or sport may not extend beyond their PE lessons at school. Ofsted found that, in many of the schools inspectors visited, the PE curriculum did not match the ambition of the national curriculum because some activities it specifies, such as dance or outdoor adventurous activities, were either not being taught well or not being taught at all.[281] Evidence shows that four in 10 primary schools (40%) used external PE teachers or providers, such as coaches.[282] In roundtable sessions held as part of the Review, we heard that the quality of these providers can vary.

In the Call for Evidence, we heard suggestions that the statement of purpose in the national curriculum is no longer appropriate, and that there is too much emphasis on success in competitive sport.[283] Evidence suggests that England is an international outlier in this regard: a 2019 OECD report found that many countries are shifting towards

[277] Computed as the sum of students taking PE and Sports.
[278] Department of Health and Social Care (2020) - Physical activity guidelines: UK Chief Medical Officers' report
[279] DfE, Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department of Health and Social Care (2023) - School Sport and Activity Action Plan
[280] DfE (2025) - 'Subjects taught and Specialist teachers and hours' from 'School workforce in England'
[281] Ofsted (2023) - Levelling the playing field: the physical education subject report
[282] DfE (2023) - School and college panel: omnibus surveys for 2022 to 2023 – April 2023
[283] DfE (2013) - National curriculum in England: physical education programmes of study

a more holistic curriculum that balances competition and sports with other less competitive dimensions.[284] England is referred to as a 'notable exception', with competitive sports 'becoming an increasingly central component in the PE national curriculum'. The OECD report found that this could be limiting participation among certain groups of students.

The Review acknowledges the importance of striking a balance between competition and inclusive participation. However, we believe that England's distinctive approach to competitive sport in schools should be recognised and celebrated. Sport is part of our national identity and our strong tradition in competitive sports can foster mastery, confidence, and motivation across a variety of backgrounds. It is crucial that all young people, regardless of background, are supported to access competitive sport and have the chance to realise their talents at the highest level.

Nevertheless, PE must serve broader purposes. It should engage and motivate all young people. We therefore recommend that the defined purpose of compulsory PE is broadened slightly to reflect the role it plays in pupils' holistic development, while preserving the role of competitive sports and emphasising the subject's physical, social, cognitive, and emotional benefits.

In addition to recommending that the DfE refreshes the purpose statement for PE, we also consider there is value in updating the subject aims for each key stage. Feedback to the Call for Evidence suggests that the current aims are brief and lack clarity, posing challenges for non-specialist PE teachers in planning and teaching high-quality lessons to meet diverse needs and achieve broader educational outcomes.

Stakeholders have argued for a clear and coherent PE curriculum that focuses on developing physical skills in contexts, activities and sports that become more challenging as pupils progress. Ofsted found that many schools aim to cover a wide range of activities in PE, but the average time spent on one 'topic' or activity is only 5 hours each year. The Review is concerned that this does not support pupil development in, or mastery of, competitive sports, as there is insufficient time to build knowledge or gain relative fluency before moving on to a new activity.[285] We therefore propose that the DfE considers a clearer and more structured outline of what pupils should learn at each key stage, aligned with the refreshed subject aims.

The Call for Evidence also highlighted concerns relating to the profile of specific activities such as dance, swimming, and outdoor activities. We heard particular concern about Dance, which forms part of the PE curriculum in Key Stages 1 to 4, but which is reportedly not taught to all pupils as part of PE or, where it is taught, is not well organised (see Dance). We also recognise the importance of children learning to swim competently

[284] OECD (2019) - Making Physical Education Dynamic and Inclusive for 2030
[285] Ofsted (2023) - Levelling the playing field: the physical education subject report

and confidently. Though all schools must provide swimming and water safety instruction either in Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2,[286] data shows that in 2022/23 9% of primary schools did not offer swimming and/or water safety lessons, with only half (55%) teaching their pupils safe self-rescue in different situations.[287] There is scope, therefore, to improve specificity in the Programme of Study for these activities.

According to Ofsted, the teaching of PE qualifications is often stronger than, and prioritised over, the teaching of compulsory PE at Key Stage 4. In some cases, the GCSE exam specification is informing the curriculum at earlier key stages.[288] This aligns with the many responses to the Call for Evidence raising concerns about the effect of GCSE PE has on earlier, compulsory, non-assessed PE. Many respondents were concerned that time and focus are being taken away from physical activity in favour of theoretical PE, such as anatomy and physiology, to prepare students more effectively to follow exam pathways. It is essential that core compulsory PE from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4 remains physical in nature, ensuring that pupils and students are active for most of the lesson.

We therefore think that the DfE should rename the GCSE PE qualification - for example, to GCSE Sports Science or GCSE Sports Studies - to reflect its content more accurately and to draw a clearer distinction between it and compulsory PE.

It is also necessary to consider whether any changes to content are required to distinguish across the GCSE, the Technical Award and compulsory PE and so that the overall offer is coherent. The compulsory PE pathway should focus on practising competitive sport, developing physical capability and movement skills and fostering positive attitudes towards physical activity. In contrast, the GCSE and other qualification pathways should emphasise sports science and prepare students for further study and/or professional roles in the sports industry.[289]

Finally, we have heard problems relating to equity of access in GCSE PE and that students with special educational needs (SEN) are under-represented in the take-up of PE qualifications. In 2024/25, just 6% of students with an identified SEN entered GCSE PE compared with 12% of students with no identified SEN.[290] We heard arguments from sector stakeholders that the current GCSE PE activity list undermines the inclusivity of the qualification.[291] It comprises 58 activities, including 33 team activities and 25 individual activities. Currently, of these 58 activities, only eight are 'specialist'[292] (six team activities, including blind cricket, and two individual activities, namely boccia and polybat).

[286] DfE (2013) - National curriculum in England: physical education programmes of study
[287] DfE (2023) - School and College Panel – April 2023
[288] Ofsted (2023) - Levelling the playing field: the physical education subject report
[289] See, for example National Council for Further Education NCFE (2025) - Level 1/2 Technical Award in Sports Studies
[290] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[291] DfE (2021) - GCSE physical education
[292] Activities designed to include those with disabilities.

While any of the listed activities may be adapted or adjusted to meet the needs of disabled students, the absence of a wider range of specialist activities could still be restricting opportunities. We believe that the PE activity list should be reviewed. Caution must be exercised when undertaking this review to ensure that any changes can be assessed effectively within the existing framework.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Redrafts the purpose of study for PE, retaining the importance of competitive sports, but clarifying the significance of providing all pupils with opportunities to learn in a physical environment and emphasising its physical, social, cognitive and emotional benefits that complement and enhance overall academic performance and general wellbeing.
- Redrafts the aims of PE so that they are clearer and more coherent at each key stage.
- Introduces a concise, scaffolded approach to the attainment targets and key stage subject content within the Programmes of Study. As part of this, the Government should review how the Programmes of Study refer to individual activities (such as dance, swimming, and outdoor activity), including whether they are sufficiently specific to support quality teaching.
- Distinguishes clearly between mandatory core PE and qualification pathways, and develops distinct terminology for each. This can be achieved by renaming GCSE PE, and considering whether any content changes are required to ensure it retains a focus on sports science. The content of Key Stage 4 mandatory non-assessed PE should be revised to ensure that it focuses primarily on physical activity.
- Reviews the current GCSE PE activity list to consider ways in which it could be made more inclusive for all students, especially for students with SEND.

## Dance

- Dance is part of the statutory PE Programmes of Study from Key Stages 1 to 4.
- At Key Stage 4, the statutory entitlement to study an arts subject includes Dance, as a standalone subject separate from PE. GCSE Dance take-up was 2% in 2015/16 and 1% in 2024/25. Take-up of the Dance pathway within the Performing Arts Technical Award has been 1% since 2015/16.

- In 2024/25, 15% of state-funded schools entered students for the GCSE and 12% for the Technical Award. Overall, 26% of schools offer Dance qualifications.
- At A Level, Dance is reported as part of Performing/Expressive Arts, which typically has very small number of entries each year.[293]

The current curriculum content for Dance within the PE Programmes of Study was last updated in 2013 and came into effect from 2014. Consultation responses at that time were mixed as to whether the PE curriculum should include more or less specificity on Dance.[294]

Following reform to GCSEs, AS qualifications and A Levels in 2015, the current GCSE Dance, the AS qualification and A Level Dance have been taught from 2016.[295] GCSE Dance is a low-entry subject, and entries have fallen from an already low base.[296]

Within the PE Key Stage 1 to 4 Programmes of Study, Dance is primarily a physical discipline, focused on movement and performance; other elements, such as choreography and appreciation, are absent. At Key Stage 4, Dance qualifications are treated as a performing art. This is often reflected in how schools plan and teach Dance: it is often taught by PE departments up to (and including) Key Stage 3 and by performing arts departments at Key Stage 4.

We have heard that Dance is a popular activity with children and young people. However, in the Review's sector roundtables, both Dance and PE stakeholders called for the curriculum to support teachers to better teach Dance through a clearer PE Programme of Study that sets out the subject knowledge required for a basic understanding of it. Through the Call for Evidence, we heard that access to GCSE Dance is often limited to students who have undertaken extra-curricular or external tuition, even in schools with specialist Dance teachers. This is because of such limited curriculum provision at Key Stages 1 to 3.

Ofsted's 2023 subject report on PE found that many schools do not match the ambition of the national curriculum for Dance: in two thirds of the schools visited, Dance was not taught to all pupils or was not well organised.[297] There is also some evidence that non-specialist and generalist PE teachers are not confident in teaching Dance. A quarter

[293] Joint Council for Qualifications JCQ (2025) - Examination results – there were 906 entries in Performing/ Expressive Arts from 18-year-olds in England in 2024/25
[294] DfE (2013) - Department for Education consultation response
[295] DfE (2015) - GCSE dance; Ofqual (2015) - GCSE, AS and A Level Dance: Decisions on Conditions and Guidance
[296] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence: (Curriculum subject trends over time); DfE (2025) - Pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 2024/25; DfE (2025) - Subject entries 2024/25
[297] Ofsted (2023) - Levelling the playing field: the physical education subject report

(26%) of primary teachers did not feel confident in teaching the 'performance of simple dances' at Key Stage 1, while more than a third (36%) did not feel confident in teaching 'dances using a range of movement patterns' at Key Stage 2.[298]

Through the Call for Evidence, we heard that the current lack of detail in the PE Programmes of Study inhibits many schools from developing a clear curriculum, and this means that intended outcomes for students in Dance by the end of Key Stage 3 are not clear. We therefore recommend some additional specificity is added to the PE Programmes of Study to clarify expectations for Dance, support breadth within the PE curriculum, and improve progression to GCSE Dance. The focus on movement should be retained, but other aspects, such as choreography and performance, should also be considered.

Take-up of formal qualifications at Key Stage 4 represents a consistently small proportion of all qualifications taken for a number of reasons. Some of these reasons go beyond the Review's remit (for example, the limited number of specialist teachers and the cost to schools of running courses with small cohorts). The decline in take-up of performing arts subjects at Key Stage 4 is also widely attributed to accountability and performance measures (such as the EBacc) constraining choice, although take-up of GCSE Dance has always been low.

Throughout our engagement, school-based experts generally agreed that the existing level 2 Performing Arts Technical Award works well, is liked by schools and students, and offers a good option for progression in Dance. Both the Call for Evidence and subsequent expert discussion highlighted concern, however, that GCSE Dance has too much emphasis on theoretical content and written evidence, especially in the written exam, and focuses insufficiently on practical performance. Respondents to the Call for Evidence also argued that significant elements of the current GCSE subject content and related assessment methods do not reflect Dance as a creative discipline, such as a set assessment involving students performing to a metronome beat. We therefore recommend review of the GCSE Dance subject content and assessment methods to reflect it better as a creative discipline that encompasses performance, choreography and appreciation.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Reviews how the PE Key Stage 1 to 4 Programmes of Study refer to Dance, including whether they are sufficiently specific to support high-quality teaching and students' progression, including to further study.

[298] DfE (2023) - School and college panel: omnibus surveys for 2022 to 2023 – April 2023

- Reviews the subject content, balance of assessment and assessment methods of GCSE Dance so that the qualification is inclusive, representative and better suited to the discipline.

## Religious Education (RE)

- RE is a basic curriculum[299] subject from Key Stages 1 to 4 and in school sixth forms.
- Take-up of the optional GCSE in Religious Studies was 28% in 2009/10 and 31% in 2024/25.
- In 2024/25, 70% of state-funded schools entered students for GCSE Religious Studies.
- A Level Religious Studies entries made up 2% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 2% in 2023/24.

Since 1944, RE has been a compulsory subject in schools in England in some form. Initially, this was 'religious instruction' and was limited only to Christianity. At the time of the 1988 Education Reform Act, the subject's title changed to 'Religious Education' and encompassed the other main world religions represented in Great Britain in addition to Christianity. Local Authority Standing Advisory Councils on RE (SACREs) became mandatory, and RE became part of a school's basic curriculum for all pupils and students between the age of 5 and 18. The legislative requirements for RE in relation to maintained schools have since been mirrored in funding agreements for academies.

The RE stakeholder context is diverse, including different faith bodies, secular groups and experts from teaching and the education sector more widely. Stakeholders' responses to our Call for Evidence showed there was a strong consensus about the subject's importance and its essential place in a school's curriculum, stressing its important role in children and young people's intellectual, personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.[300] RE is a place where they encounter differing beliefs, sometimes for the first time, understand the tenets of major faiths, and learn how to reason and wrestle with existential questions. Understanding the tenets of Christianity also unlocks a wider understanding of British culture in terms of Christianity's historic

[299] A 'basic curriculum' subject is not on the national curriculum but must be provided by schools. Parents or carers have the right to withdraw their child from these subjects, though different conditions may apply between subjects: GOV.UK (2025) - The national curriculum: Overview
[300] The National Archives (2025) - Education Act 2002

influence and how it has shaped modern-day Britain. We have heard that RE provides a space for pupils to learn about human mutuality and reciprocity, that it develops their capacity to understand one another, and that it supports strong, secure, and confident communities with good relationships. Given the role that religion, belief and values play in local, national, and international events, it continues to be vital for children and young people to have access to high-quality RE.

Given RE's status as a basic rather than national curriculum subject, its content is not nationally defined, and no specified national standard exists against which to benchmark the quality of compulsory RE at Key Stages 1 to 4. While there are undoubtedly pockets of excellent practice in both faith and non-faith schools, the evidence suggests that provision for RE in many schools is not good enough and does not prepare pupils adequately for life beyond school.[301]

Syllabi for RE are locally determined by an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC). SACREs then advise local authorities on their delivery; they also advise local authorities on all matters relating to RE. Some SACREs support high-quality regional practice, but many no longer have the resources or reach to provide such support, resulting in increasing fragmentation.[302] Financial constraints have led to squeezed support in many areas, meaning that producing new agreed syllabi is often done with a 'very tight budget' and is 'increasingly reliant on voluntary support'.[303] The 2018 Commission on RE concluded that the structures and systems supporting RE have not kept pace with changes in the wider education sector, including greater academisation, a move towards a school-led system, and a world in which children and young people encounter a broader range of world views, including, for example, Humanism.[304]

All this is further exacerbated by the complex legislative framework underpinning RE, which hasn't changed in substance since 1944, apart from some minor updates in 1988. Curriculum requirements depend on school type and may differ between academies and maintained schools, as well as between schools with a religious designation and those without. As Ofsted has concluded, the quality of RE is not necessarily determined by the type of school, but the differing requirements seemingly contribute to a lack of parity across the sector.[305] Moreover, the Review has heard that, in practice, the dated legislation has invited 'workarounds', including regarding the ongoing requirement to teach RE to the age of 18 in schools. Throughout our engagement with sector experts and during the Call for Evidence, we have heard that this static statutory backdrop, with

[301] Ofsted (2024) - Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report; Religious Education Council (2018) - Religion And Worldviews Approach to RE: Resource Page
[302] A report from the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on RE (NASACRE) found that the majority of SACREs in England were not receiving a sufficient share of the central school services block (CSSB) which would reasonably be expected so that they could meet their statutory functions, including the provision of a clerk. NASACRE (2023) – NASACRE's Second Report.
[303] Smalley, P. (2019) - A critical policy analysis of local religious education in England
[304] Religious Education Council (2018) - Religion And Worldviews Approach to RE: Resource Page
[305] Ofsted (2024) - Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report

complex and fraying local support arrangements, has led to uneven provision and tokenistic practice in some areas.

Some work to improve and standardise a curriculum offer for RE has been done, most notably by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC), which published its National Content Standard for RE in England in 2023.[306] This has received consensus from across the sector and laid strong foundations for change. We believe it has potential as a catalyst for more substantial reform.

RE can be controversial and contentious. Different sector and faith organisations have different beliefs and different interests in the present arrangements. We have therefore engaged widely on this subject during the Review, seeking as many views as possible and aiming to identify points of consensus as well as areas of debate. Having evaluated the evidence, we are of the view that RE's importance is not currently reflected in its standing in the curriculum. The Review believes that RE should be moved to the national curriculum to improve access to high-quality provision and to prevent further diminishment. However, we are conscious of the sensitivities and complexities involved, including the legislative implications and the wider considerations relating to voluntary-aided schools with a religious character. It is important that these issues are accounted for in our recommendations.

The Review ultimately wishes to see RE in the national curriculum, but it recognises that it is unrealistic for this to be achieved immediately. We therefore believe that a staged approach to reform is the most appropriate way forward. To this end, we recommend that the Government invites the sector to establish an independent task and finish group made up of representatives from faith bodies, secular groups and experts from the teaching and wider education sector, to develop a draft RE curriculum. This group should be consultative, continuing the work of the Review in liaising with relevant external parties (including faith groups and communities, secular groups and faith and non-faith schools) and should seek to build on the REC's National Content Standard. The group should also consider whether there would be benefit in changing the name of Religious Education.

The process of producing a draft RE curriculum will be important in establishing whether a core of RE content can be agreed on across the sector to facilitate any move of RE to the national curriculum. Most stakeholders agree that all pupils, regardless of the type of school they attend, should have an entitlement to high-quality RE and that the most effective way to do this is by moving it to the national curriculum. However, if this desired quality and consistency are to be achieved, there will be trade-offs, and all parties will have to make compromises to achieve consensus.

[306] Religious Education Council (2023) - National Content Standard for RE in England – 1st Edition – 2023

We recognise that making RE a national curriculum subject is not a panacea that will automatically improve the quality and quantity of compulsory RE. Other mechanisms would also be needed, including reviewing the DfE's non-statutory guidance for RE (which has not been updated since it was published in 2010) and the wider framework (which includes SACREs, for example). Following any changes, attention may also need to be given to the subject content of the optional GCSE in Religious Studies.

Finally, the Review has carefully considered the requirement that learners study RE between the age of 16 and 18. Currently, this requirement applies only to learners attending school sixth forms and does not extend to other 16-19 providers, such as sixth form colleges and further education colleges. The Review considers that, by age 16, students should have a secure grounding in RE, and one that should be strengthened if the recommendation about the national curriculum is taken forward. We also consider the compulsory study of RE to 18 to be inconsistent with 16-19 study's aim of prioritising learners' choices and subject specialisms. As such, we recommend removing the statutory requirement that learners in school sixth forms study RE: the Government should consider this as part of its review of the wider legislation in which RE sits. We believe this will better reflect actual practice and foster parity across 16-19 settings. We recognise that some schools will want to continue providing RE up to 18, and they would be free to do so. If learners wish to continue to study RE at 16-19, level 3 qualifications are available for them to do so.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Adds RE to the national curriculum in due course. A staged approach should be taken, in line with the following steps:

  **Stage 1:**

  Representatives from faith groups, secular groups and the wider teaching and education sector that we heard from during the Review should build on the constructive and collaborative work they have been doing through the course of the Review. DfE should invite the sector to form a task and finish group, convened and led by an expert Chair who is independent of any particular secular or faith group interest or representation. The review recommends that, given her leadership of this strand of the Review's work (based on her expertise), Dr Vanessa Ogden CBE should undertake this role, ensuring momentum in the successful convening she has established. This group should liaise with relevant external parties and, building on the existing National Content Standard for RE in England, engage with faith and non-faith schools, as well as RE organisations and faith communities, to co-create a draft RE curriculum.

Whilst this work should be sector-led, the DfE should welcome efforts the sector makes to reach a consensus and support and facilitate this group where necessary.

Alongside this, the DfE should consider the legislative framework for RE, including, for example, what any changes to its status in the curriculum would mean for functions such as SACREs. A long-term plan for implementing potential changes to legislation should be drafted.

As part of this review, the DfE should consider removing the statutory requirement for learners in school sixth forms to study RE.

In parallel, the DfE should review the non-statutory guidance for RE, which has not been updated since 2010, to establish whether beneficial changes to subject content could be made in the short term that do not pre-empt the wider work the Review is recommending.

**Stage 2:**
If consensus on a draft RE curriculum can be reached, the DfE should conduct a formal consultation on the detailed content.

Alongside this, the DfE should consult on proposed changes to the legislative framework, including any proposal to repeal the requirement to teach RE in school sixth forms.

## Science

- Science is a statutory core curriculum subject from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4.
- GCSE Combined Science take-up was 63% in 2009/10 and 66% in 2024/25.
- GCSE Biology take-up was 18% in 2009/10 and 24% in 2024/25.
- GCSE Chemistry take-up was 18% in 2009/10 and 23% in 2024/25.
- GCSE Physics take-up was 18% in 2009/10 and 23% in 2024/25.[307]
- In 2024/25, 91% of state-funded schools entered students for Combined Science; 87% for Biology and 82% for Chemistry and Physics.
- A Level Biology entries made up 7% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 8% in 2023/24.
- A Level Chemistry entries made up 5% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 7% in 2023/24.

[307] Students may decide to take a single science GCSE alongside their Combined Science GCSE. Therefore, there may be differences in the proportion of take up across the single sciences.

- A Level Physics entries made up 4% of A Level entries in 2009/10 and 5% in 2023/24.

The Science curriculum aims to provide a foundation for understanding the world through the specific disciplines of Biology, Chemistry and Physics. During the last curriculum review, curriculum aims for Science saw a strong shift towards scientific knowledge and understanding of nature, processes, and methods of science. The Review believes that it is important to retain and enhance the knowledge-rich focus that has been developed.

England's pupils perform reasonably well against international benchmarks in Science in both primary and secondary.[308] However, our international performance has not improved in recent years and performance of 15-year-olds has seen a gradual decline since 2012.[309] A number of factors that influence Science performance, such as challenges in recruiting specialist Science teachers,[310] fall outside the scope of this Review. However, we have identified several areas that could be strengthened to support our ambition of achieving high standards for all.

Primary Science education faces several structural and systemic challenges that hinder pupils' progression and engagement. Over the past decade, it has been the subject of numerous systematic and narrative reviews.[311] In 2009, national tests in Science at the end of Key Stage 2 were removed, amid concerns they promoted a 'teach to the test' culture. This aimed to give teachers greater freedom to teach creative and engaging Science lessons rather than focusing primarily on assessment.[312] However, stakeholders have expressed concern that the primary Science curriculum is not taught consistently. A lack of curriculum cohesion and curriculum time for it in some schools means pupils are not able to master the content. The result is difficulties during the transition to Science at secondary school.[313] Subject experts argued that the primary Science curriculum is unevenly distributed across the disciplines of Biology, Chemistry and Physics. Stakeholders also highlighted missed opportunities to create cross-curricular links between Science and other subjects, and between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 Science, resulting in unnecessary repetition of topics at later key stages and limiting opportunities for students to build on and apply prior knowledge.[314]

[308] DfE (2023) - PISA 2022: national report for England; DfE (2025) - Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 2023: England
[309] DfE (2023) - PISA 2022: national report for England
[310] DfE (2025) - Initial Teacher Training Census, Academic year 2024/25
[311] University of Manchester & The Ogden Trust (2021) - The 10 Key Issues with Children's Learning in Primary Science in England.; EEF (2023) – A systematic review of approaches to primary science in teaching; Wellcome Trust (2020) - State of the nation' report of UK primary science education
[312] Harlen, W. (2018) - The Teaching of Science in Primary Schools
[313] Ofsted (2023) - Finding the optimum: the science subject report - GOV.UK
[314] United Learning (2024) - Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: United Learning response ('For example, the water cycle appears in both Key Stage 2 Science and Geography, and again in 'hydrology' in Key Stage 3 Geography, without clear progression in how pupils' understanding of this

The Review recommends a more coherent and structured approach to curriculum design across key stages, with clearer guidance on what content should be taught at what depth at different ages, to ensure smooth transitions between key stages and phases, especially from primary to secondary. Redrafting should add clarity to the Key Stage 1 and 2 Programmes of Study, in particular to establish a clear foundation of essential knowledge and skills that all pupils can draw on to inform their scientific thinking. This could include a rationale for activity at each stage, outlining for example the essential experiences pupils should have exposure to, so that abstract scientific ideas are grounded in real life. The primary Science curriculum should also ensure that all pupils become familiar with using scientific evidence, concepts and language. In tandem, it should also support teachers to ensure an appropriate balance across the three science disciplines at primary, and to promote the cross-curricular links between Science and other subjects.

Feedback from our Call for Evidence respondents, alongside insights from Science curriculum experts and Learned Societies, has highlighted a clear need to streamline and update the Science curriculum across all key stages. Concerns were raised that the current structure hinders pupils' ability to develop deep understanding and mastery of key concepts. In particular, we heard that the volume of content at GCSE level often results in Science being taught as a list of facts to memorise rather than as a subject grounded in fundamental principles. A Teacher Tapp survey found that four in five (80%) of Science teachers supported reducing the volume of content at Key Stage 4, frequently citing outdated or unnecessary topics. The survey also found that 31% wanted Space to be reintroduced to GCSE Combined Science, while Using Resources, Electrolysis and Electromagnetism were the most commonly suggested topics for removal.[315]

We therefore recommend that content across all key stages should be refined and re-sequenced in line with the fundamental concepts of each scientific discipline.[316] This should help pupils build progressively on foundational knowledge, supporting deep and lasting scientific understanding and scientific literacy. We recommend detailed mapping of topic progression from Key Stages 1 to 4, ensuring that key concepts are revisited meaningfully and streamlining overly broad topics that have excessive examples. Once this foundational work is complete, we recommend considering the inclusion of new or reintroduced content where evidence suggests it could enhance students' engagement with, understanding of and progression in Science. This should be done without compromising the knowledge-rich coherence and rigour established in the Science curriculum to date.

The Review has heard concerns that a lack of representation of the diversity of scientists and their work can have a negative impact on pupils' engagement and reinforce the

should develop across subjects and key stages'); University of Manchester & The Ogden Trust (2021) - The 10 Key Issues with Children's Learning in Primary Science in England.

[315] Teacher Tapp (2023) - Science: We Want More Space!

[316] Association for Science Education (2010) - Principles and Big Ideas of Science Education; Institute of Physics (2024) - The fundamentals of 11 to 19 physics

perception that Science, and scientific careers, are not for them.[317] The Review considers that the Science curriculum must be firmly grounded in scientific knowledge and concepts, rather than focusing on individuals. Nevertheless, we want to ensure the curriculum empowers teachers to illustrate the Science curriculum with inclusive examples of individuals working in and contributing to science, [318] so that all pupils feel engaged by Science; in turn supporting their futures as informed citizens and securing the pipeline for the economically important Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) workforce.[319,] Resources from Oak National Academy and other organisations should be used to support this.

Many respondents to the Call for Evidence argued for clearer, more coherently sequenced opportunities to develop key skills and experiences through practical science. Evidence suggests that the overall frequency of practical work[320] in schools has reduced since 2016, with a further reduction in hands-on practical work since 2019, and the most common medium of exposure to practical being video.[321] The role and usefulness of practical work in Science education have long been debated.[322] Despite high-quality practical work being an essential element of the Science curriculum and wider scientific study, it is often delivered without a clearly established purpose linked to curriculum aims or to the methods, objects and phenomena studied by scientists.[323] This has meant that practical work is not always effective and can detract from already limited teaching time.

We therefore recommend that practical science activity - focused on high-quality teacher demonstration and hands on work by pupils - be underpinned by clearly defined purposes in the Programmes of Study and GCSE subject content. Practical work should serve meaningful goals, such as building students' procedural confidence with scientific equipment, reinforcing key scientific concepts and fostering curiosity and engagement. This should be supported by additional guidance and mapping that identifies which topics lend themselves to specific types of practical work and outlines the relevant skills and procedural knowledge to be acquired.

As set out previously, climate change is a significant challenge that affects many aspects of modern life, and young people have been clear in their desire to see an explicit focus

[317] Archer, L., Moote, J., MacLeod, E., Francis, B., & DeWitt, J. (2020) ASPIRES 2: Young people's science and career aspirations, age 10-19. London: UCL Institute of Education; A key finding from the British Science Association (BSA) (2023) - Youth Insights Data: Science's service to young people and our society was that only 8% of young people can think of a scientist who looks like them.
[318] Additionally, the curriculum should acknowledge the broader historical context of science and scientific discovery across the 18th and 19th centuries, to enable open discussions about the historical limitations of diversity in scientific fields.
[319] Archer, L. & DeWitt, J. (2016) - Understanding Young People's Science Aspirations | How students form ideas about `becoming a scientist`
[320] Which can mean student hands-on practicals, teacher demonstrations, or video demonstrations.
[321] Royal Society (2019) - Science Education Tracker 2019; Royal Society (2023) - Science Education Tracker 2023
[322] Nuffield Foundation (2025) - Purposeful and effective practical work in primary school science; Gatsby (2017) - Good Practical Science; Millar, R. (2004) - The role of practical work in the teaching and learning of science
[323] Ofsted (2023) - Finding the optimum: the science subject report

on climate education.[324] Climate science is also critical to supporting the wider economy, with the growth of the green economy expected to double the number of STEM jobs in the UK.[325] The Science curriculum currently makes only limited reference to climate science and scientific work to combat climate change, and some content in the Programme of Study is outdated. This should be addressed. Giving appropriate attention to climate science should empower young people to understand the scientific causes of, consequences of, and potential solutions to climate change. Achieving this requires a coordinated approach across scientific disciplines, ensuring that environmental and climate-related content is integrated meaningfully and coherently rather than only being presented as a standalone topic.

Finally, our engagement has underscored the importance of ensuring that the Science curriculum supports young people to deal with misinformation and other challenges. See media literacy. It is vital that the Science curriculum equips children and young people, across all key stages, with the skills to evaluate scientific claims critically, assess evidence from multiple sources and understand how science operates in everyday life.[326]

## Triple Science

There is a single national curriculum for Science up to Key Stage 4. However, the GCSE subject content divides the subject into two distinct routes. Combined Science refers to taking the equivalent of two GCSEs in Science, covering equal shares of Biology, Chemistry and Physics (resulting in two GCSE grades which are not assigned to individual disciplines). Triple Science (often referred to as 'separate Sciences') refers to taking three individual GCSEs, one each in Biology, Chemistry and Physics, with a grade awarded for each one. Since its introduction, there has been a general positive trend in the uptake of Triple Science, from 16% in 2009/10 to 27% in 2018/19; it has fallen slightly in recent years, with 23% of state-funded pupils taking Triple Science in 2024/25.[327]

Science education and further progression into STEM-related careers are unequivocally important for economic growth and driving important societal change.[328] These careers are also comparatively well paid.[329] Students who take Triple Science, rather than Combined Science, are significantly more likely to study Science subjects at A Level and degree level, even when controlling for variables such as prior attainment. Specifically,

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[324] Royal Society (2023) - Science Education Tracker 2023; British Science Association (2023) - Youth Insights Data: Topics of importance to young people

[325] UK Parliament (2025) - UK STEM skills pipeline. The report notes that, with a current national shortfall of 173,000 skilled STEM workers already, it is crucial that young people receive a suitable education in climate science so they can secure these future opportunities.

[326] Godec, S., King, H. & Archer, L. (2017) - The Science Capital Teaching Approach: engaging students with science, promoting social justice. London: University College London. UCL Institute of Education (2017) - The Science Capital Teaching Approach

[327] Science and technology Select Committee (2012) - Supplementary written evidence submitted by the Department for Education; DfE (2025) - Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25

[328] FFT Education Datalab (2023) - The long-term outcomes associated with Key Stage 4 science options; UK Parliament (2025) - UK STEM skills pipeline; British Science Association (2025) - Science education vital for UK growth and fighting misinformation, British Science Week survey shows

[329] DfE (2018) - Undergraduate degrees: labour market returns

students who take Triple Science rather than Combined Science are 3.9 times more likely to go on to take at least one science subject at A Level,[330] while students who take Triple Science are 1.8 times more likely to go on to study a science subject at degree level.[331] When controlling for prior attainment and student characteristics, students who achieved at least one grade A/7 in Triple Science had slightly higher lifetime earnings than those who achieved at least one A/7 in Combined Science. Furthermore, the lifetime earnings return from achieving at least one C/4 in Triple Science is substantially higher than achieving at least one C/4 grade in Combined Science.[332]

Despite these clear benefits, issues of equity surrounding access to Triple Science have been raised both through this Review and wider research. Around 9% of state-funded mainstream secondary schools do not currently offer Triple Science.[333] Even in schools where it is available, internal practices often direct some young people to Combined Science rather than Triple Science.[334] These patterns reflect social and geographic inequalities. A DfE survey shows that 8% of students surveyed in Year 10 and 11 were discouraged from taking Triple Science and 5% did not have a choice. Regional disparities were also evident: 4% of secondary students in the North West would have liked to have taken Triple Science but were unable to, compared to just 1% in London and the South East.[335] Socio-economic factors have also been shown to reflect the type of Science GCSE pathway students follow, with schools that have a higher proportion of disadvantaged students being less likely to enter students for Triple Science.[336] Currently, only 13% of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds take Triple Science, compared to 28% of those not disadvantaged.[337]

The Review acknowledges the system-wide and school-level barriers that limit access to Triple Science, many of which fall outside the scope of this Review. They include a lack of specialist teachers and timetabling challenges because of the increased teaching time required. Nonetheless, it is both important and fair that all students should be entitled to study Triple Science if they wish to. We therefore recommend that the Government introduces a student entitlement to Triple Science so that any student who wants to study

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[330] The likelihood of a student going on to take A Level Chemistry was 4.4 times higher than for a Combined Science student; for Biology it was 3.6 times higher and for Physics 2.9 times higher. FFT Education Datalab (2023) - The long-term outcomes associated with Key Stage 4 science options
[331] FFT Education Datalab (2023) - The long-term outcomes associated with Key Stage 4 science options; Francis, B., Henderson, M., Godec, S., Watson, E., Archer, L. & Moote, J. (2023) - An exploration of the impact of science stratification in the English school curriculum: the relationship between 'Double' and 'Triple' Science pathways and pupils' further study of science
[332] DfE (2021) - GCSE attainment and lifetime earnings
[333] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[334] Francis, B., Henderson, M., Godec, S., Watson, E., Archer, L. & Moote, J. (2023) - An exploration of the impact of science stratification in the English school curriculum: the relationship between 'Double' and 'Triple' Science pathways and pupils' further study of science
[335] DfE (2023) - Parent, pupil and learner panel omnibus surveys for 2022 to 2023: April and May Wave
[336] STEM Learning (2022) - Disadvantage, gender & ethnicity in STEM - and how we're rising to the challenge
[337] DfE (2025) - Key Stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25

it can do so. This should eventually be statutory, with the intention to allow preparatory time and support for schools that do not currently offer it. The DfE should also conduct further analytical work as part of planning for wider implementation of this gradual change, including taking account of workforce considerations, and consulting with key stakeholders further.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures more cohesion and consistency across the primary Science curriculum, including clearer guidance on what should be taught, to what depth, at each stage.
- At all key stages, bases the Science curriculum on the fundamental concepts of each individual discipline so that students develop deep scientific and disciplinary knowledge and skills. In light of this, the Government should consider where content can be streamlined, especially at GCSE, without affecting rigour or the subject's knowledge-rich focus.
- Ensures that the curriculum more clearly articulates the purpose and expectations of high-quality practical work in supporting the building of substantive knowledge and the development of important skills and procedural knowledge.
- Ensures that, in relevant areas, the Science curriculum explicitly develops students' understanding of the scientific principles that explain climate change and sustainability and the global efforts to tackle them.
- Introduces an entitlement to Triple Science at GCSE, so that any student who wants to study Triple Science has the opportunity to do so.

## Key Stage 4 Technical Awards

Technical Awards are level 1 or 2 qualifications at Key Stage 4, designed to support progression to further study but with a more vocational focus compared to GCSEs.[338] They are typically taken alongside GCSEs. Technical Awards across 18 subjects[339] are included in the 2025 secondary performance tables.[340] They cover a diverse range of subjects, some of which overlap with GCSE subject areas (including Performing Arts, Music and PE) and many that do not (including Travel and Tourism, Animal Care and Hair and Personal Care). The most popular subjects assessed in 2023/24 were PE, Health and Social Care and Business.[341] Given the large number of Technical Awards, this section considers them collectively.

Technical Awards play an important role in offering a broad curriculum that accommodates diverse interests and supports progression to different 16-19 pathways. Like GCSEs, Technical Awards have a limited number of guided learning hours (a minimum of 120),[342] which allows for fair comparisons within Progress 8.

A significant proportion of schools offer Technical Awards. In 2024/25, 45% of students in state-funded schools took at least one Technical Award,[343] with 84% of state-funded schools and 91% of state-funded mainstream schools offering them.[344] In summer 2025, 6% of Key Stage 4 grades were for a Technical Award.[345]

Evidence shows that, for most students, Technical Awards are taken as part of a broader qualification portfolio, primarily consisting of GCSEs. Typically, students take one Technical Award alongside around eight GCSEs. The data also shows that disadvantaged students (50%) are disproportionately more likely to enter Technical Awards than their non-disadvantaged peers (43%).[346]

These qualifications contribute to school accountability measures, forming part of the 'open' group of subjects within Progress 8. Although up to three Technical Awards can be counted, only around 3% of students take three or more.[347] This pattern reflects the reforms introduced following the Wolf Review, which aimed to ensure that vocational

[338] A vocational qualification is aligned to a sector and is usually taught and assessed in an applied way. A technical qualification meanwhile has a direct alignment with an occupational standard. Despite the name 'Technical Awards', these qualifications are therefore vocational rather than technical.
[339] There are some repeated offerings in the same subject by different awarding bodies (e.g. Pearson BTEC and WJEC Health and Social Care are counted separately) and different syllabus codes for the same qualification (e.g. performing arts with a 'dance' approach and a 'production' approach are counted separately).
[340] DfE (2025) - Key Stage 4 qualifications and discount codes: 2014 to 2027 performance tables
[341] DfE (2025) – Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25
[342] DfE (2024) - 14 to 16 qualifications technical guide: 2024 performance tables
[343] DfE (2025) - Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25
[344] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[345] Ofqual (2025) - Qualification results in England: summer 2025
[346] DfE (2025) - 'Subject pupil level characteristic data', divided by total number of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 'All state-funded pupil characteristics and geography data' from 'Key stage 4 performance'
[347] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)

qualifications are rigorous and purposeful, as well as ensuring all young people access a broad and balanced qualifications portfolio.[348]

Schools face practical challenges in delivering Technical Awards, including managing non-exam assessment and access to specialist teachers. Despite these challenges, many school leaders we spoke to during the Review noted that the content and approach of Technical Awards are appealing to students. Research indicates that students taking Technical Awards tend to have lower absence and exclusion rates compared to similar students who do not take Technical Awards.[349] This was reflected in a recent DfE survey where school leaders said that they offered Technical Awards because of the appeal of the assessment methods (48%), because they support students' engagement with school (42%) and because their content was more interesting or relevant to students than GCSEs (40%). Additionally, two-thirds (69%) of leaders said that they offer Technical Awards because they perceive these qualifications prepare students better for their 16-19 pathways compared to GCSEs.[350]

Historically, Technical Awards have faced criticism for being perceived as an 'easy' option compared to GCSEs, a perception shaped by earlier, less standardised vocational qualifications.[351] They underwent significant reform in 2020 that aimed to respond to this criticism by introducing greater rigour and by making Technical Awards more comparable with GCSEs. The reformed qualifications are still being embedded in the system, with 2025 marking only the second year of awarding. As such, most evidence relates to the pre-reformed qualifications. Data on progression outcomes for learners who have taken the current suite of Technical Awards is particularly lacking, limiting the extent to which we can draw firm conclusions about their long-term impact.

Technical Awards are designed to align with a broad sector or occupational group (for example, health and social care, animal care or engineering), but they are not intended to provide direct progression into a specific occupation or technical or vocational pathway. Instead, their purpose is to provide students with a broad introduction to an industry and/or vocational field and to support progression into related 16-19 pathways, including technical and academic qualifications at level 3, level 2 and apprenticeships. To ensure that all learners at level 3 have high-quality opportunities, the Review recommends that a third, vocational, 16-19 pathway is introduced alongside technical (T Levels) and academic (A Levels) pathways (see V Levels). This 'V Level' pathway would provide a strengthened vocational offer for 16 to 19-year-olds. This may mean that changes need to be made to the content of Technical Awards to support progression to this new vocational pathway.

[348] DfE (2014) - Review of vocational education: the Wolf report
[349] DfE (2019) - Non-GCSE qualifications in England: key stage 4 entries and absence and exclusions outcomes
[350] DfE (2025) - School and college voice: November 2024
[351] DfE (2014) - Review of vocational education: the Wolf report

## Recommendations

Given that Technical Awards were reformed only recently and that limited data exists on the reformed suite of Technical Awards, we do not suggest initiating significant reform at this stage. A period of stability will enable the DfE to monitor the relevance and quality of the current suite of Technical Awards. However, we think scope exists for some evolutionary changes within the current structures to build on the progress made so far with these qualifications.

We recommend that the Government:

- Allows the reformed Key Stage 4 Technical Awards to embed fully in the system before the DfE considers implementing further significant reforms.
- Should prepare to review the reformed Technical Awards from 2027 with attention given to:
    - Attainment and completion rates, functioning of assessments, stakeholders' views and other relevant data.
    - How content supports progression to 16-19 pathways, including those which will have been reformed.
    - Whether the structural requirements defined in the technical guidance, including assessment requirements, supports the broader purpose of Technical Awards whilst ensuring they remain rigorous and reliable.
- Should encourage awarding organisations to update Key Stage 4 Technical Awards to improve progression to the updated 16-19 pathways, if the 16-19 'third pathway' of V Levels is developed and linked to occupational standards.
- Maintains the current moratorium on new Technical Awards to ensure stability and effective monitoring, except where evidence of demand for a new qualification or substantive feedback on existing qualifications is exceptionally compelling (for example, this Review's recommendation relating to the Technical Award for Music).

# Accountability, performance measures and assessment

# Accountability and performance measures

Accountability measures are designed to inform evaluation of schools and colleges, using their students' and learners' outcomes. They are typically used to measure attainment and/or progress across the primary, secondary and 16-19 phases.

In this section, we focus on the measures which affect the curriculum and related behaviours at secondary level, specifically the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and Progress 8 (alongside Attainment 8). While we have considered accountability measures across all phases, we propose that changes are particularly needed at this level.
We support the continued focus of primary accountability measures on the core subjects of Maths and English, which remain essential and should be maintained.

In this section, we also consider the inclusivity of performance measures, being especially mindful of the increasing number of students with SEND in the education system.

## English Baccalaureate (EBacc)

The EBacc, introduced in 2010, refers to a specific combination of GCSE subjects. Performance measures report the percentage of students entering and achieving the EBacc. The combination of subjects reflects a specific academic portfolio comprised of Maths, English (Language and Literature), Sciences, a Modern or Ancient Language, and History or Geography.[352] The purpose of the EBacc was to:

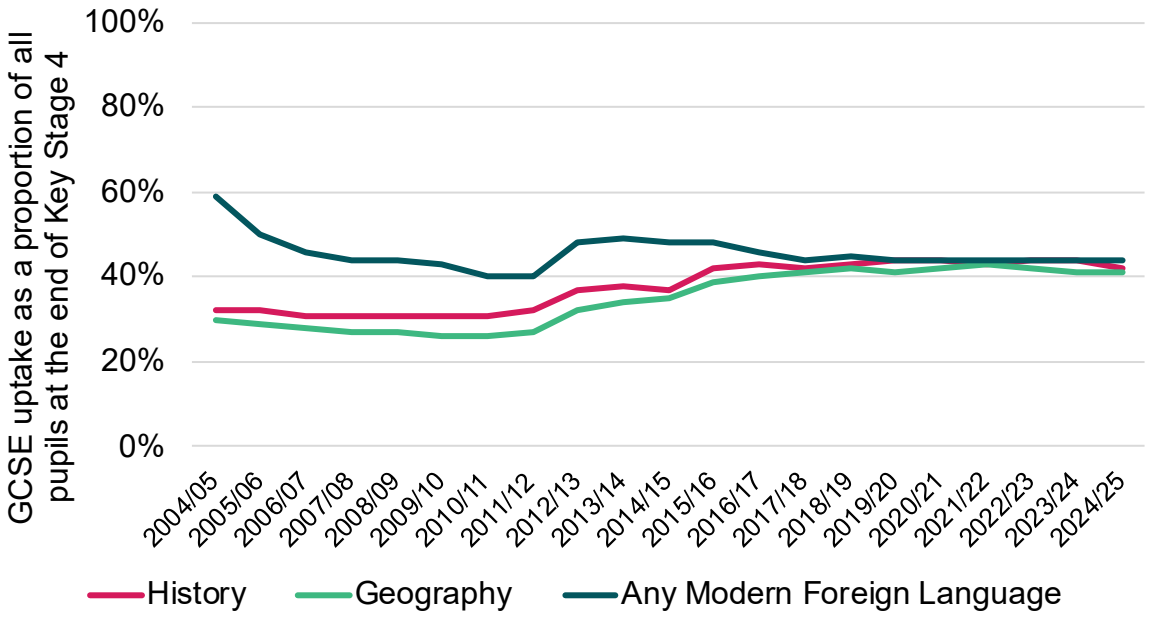
- Ensure that students pursue a broad range of academic subjects up to age 16
- Break the link between students' backgrounds and their GCSE choices
- Reverse the trend of falling GCSE entries in History, Geography and MFL seen at the time.

Students' choices can unintentionally limit future study options, particularly for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The EBacc subjects reflect those the Russell Group of universities has previously referred to as 'facilitating subjects' at A Level. So, studying them at GCSE was seen to support progress to the A Levels that 'high tariff' universities valued more highly. However, the Russell Group never intended for facilitating subjects to be the 'only subjects pupils should consider to get into a Russell Group university'[353] and have since stopped the publication of the list of 'facilitating subjects' when they launched their Informed Choices website.

[352] DfE (2019) - English Baccalaureate (EBacc)
[353] Frequently asked questions | Informed Choices

The EBacc was therefore well intentioned and has had some successes. Before the introduction of the EBacc performance measures, take-up of MFL and Geography was declining and History take-up stood at just over 30% of students.[354] Following their introduction, the proportions of learners taking Geography, History and any language at GCSE all saw increased uptake of at least five percentage points between 2011/12 and 2012/13. Figure 7. Proportion of Key Stage 4 students taking GCSE History, GCSE Geography, and GCSEs in at least one Modern Foreign Language shows that for MFL, this fell between 2013/14 and 2017/18, before remaining stable from 2017/18 onwards, with 44% of students taking a language GCSE in 2024/25 (Figure 7).[355]

**Figure 7. Proportion of Key Stage 4 students taking GCSE History, GCSE Geography, and GCSEs in at least one Modern Foreign Language[356]**




However, increases in the uptake of EBacc subjects have not translated into increased study of them at 16-19. While uptake in GCSE History and GCSE Geography rose by over 10% points between 2009/10 and 2024/25, entries for A Level History and A Level Geography remain relatively consistent as a proportion of all A Level entries since 2010.[357] In addition, language A Level entries as a percentage of all A Level entries fell slightly from 4% to 3% between 2009/10 and 2023/24, despite a modest rise at GCSE level.[358]

Among students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, EBacc uptake has increased since 2010/11. In 2024/25, 29% of them took the full suite of EBacc

[354] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report
[355] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report
[356] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report
[357] DfE (2025) - A level and other 16-18 results, Academic year 2023/24
[358] DfE (2025) - Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25

subjects compared with 9% in 2011. However, their EBacc uptake still remains lower than for non-disadvantaged students. In that group, EBacc uptake increased from 26% to 45% over the same period.[359]

The EBacc has also led to students being entered for GCSEs in which they are unlikely to perform well, and this is disproportionately true for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This is evidenced by the growing gap in EBacc attainment, where the gap between disadvantaged students and their peers in the proportion of the students taking and achieving the EBacc has grown from 18 percentage points in 2012/13[360] to 21 percentage points in 2024/25.[361] While promoting the importance of academic subjects and less advantaged young people's access to them is laudable, this is not valuable if it results in more young people failing in those subjects, rather than succeeding in others - and the increased EBacc attainment gap suggests that this is happening.

Evidence suggests that studying a portfolio of academic subjects aids access to A Levels and to university and that achieving the EBacc correlates with a student applying to and attending university. However, the evidence does not suggest that taking the EBacc combination of subjects increases the likelihood that students attend Russell Group universities.[362]

Responses to the Call for Evidence argued that the EBacc measures have served to unnecessarily constrain subject choice for some students (and, consequently, have affected students' engagement, their achievement or both). For those that take the EBacc combination, it has resulted in little choice about what subjects they study at Key Stage 4. Given its structure, to be eligible for the EBacc a student taking nine subjects (the national average) at Key Stage 4 would have seven subjects pre-selected (with a choice between History or Geography), or eight subjects if taking Triple Science rather than Combined Science (two GCSEs).[363] In addition, students in schools with a religious designation are often mandated to enter GCSE Religious Studies. All this leaves little space for them to choose Computing, arts and vocational subjects. Schools and organisations representing the arts and other non-EBacc subjects have strongly

[359] DfE (2016) - Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2014 to 2015; DfE (2025) - Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25
[360] DfE (2016) - Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2014 to 2015 (see Characteristics national tables) - 67% of non-disadvantaged students who entered the EBacc achieved grade 4 or above in the EBacc, compared to 49% for socio-economically disadvantaged students
[361] DfE (2025) – 'National characteristics data' from 'Key stage 4 performance' - 68% of non-disadvantaged students who entered the EBacc achieved grade 4 or above in the EBacc, compared to 47% for socio-economically disadvantaged students
[362] Anders, J., Henderson, M., Moulton, V. & Sullivan, A. (2018) - Incentivising Specific Combinations of Subjects – Does It Make Any Difference to University Access? | National Institute Economic Review | Cambridge Core
[363] To conform to EBacc, a student would take: Maths, English language and English literature, three single Sciences or Combined Science, a Modern or Ancient Language and either History or Geography, making seven GCSEs (eight if the student takes triple science rather than combined science which counts for two GCSEs).

expressed their concerns about the EBacc's constraining effects. In considering these views in relation to falls in GCSE uptake in different arts subjects we have been cautious in ascribing cause, given different issues at play (such as teacher supply, social trends etc). Nevertheless, it is notable that all arts subjects bar Art and Design have seen decline in uptake since the introduction of the EBacc.

The Review is clear that schools should promote a curriculum at Key Stage 4 that is appropriately broad and balanced, enabling young people to pursue their interests and passions whilst ensuring uptake of the subjects that are most likely to support life chances and the needs of our society and economy. This should include a strong academic core for all. We do not consider that the EBacc performance measures aid this goal. They unnecessarily constrain subject choice, have led to an increased attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students in EBacc subjects, and have not aided access to Russell Group universities as intended. Prioritising certain subjects across an extensive portfolio has created necessary trade-offs between them[364] (for example, students taking Combined instead of Triple Science).

Although the EBacc may have contributed to halting the declining take-up of Languages (noting again that causality is difficult to prove), it has not been successful in its aim of significantly increasing the proportion studying Languages.[365] The initial target that 75% of Year 10 students in state-funded mainstream schools would be studying the EBacc combination of subjects by 2022 was not met; neither was the 2025 ambition that 90% enter the EBacc , with full EBacc entry standing at just 41% in 2024/25.[366] This stalling of progress on EBacc entry progress suggests that the policy is no longer working as intended.

Given the above, our view is that the EBacc headline and associated measures should be removed from school accountability measures.

## Progress 8

Progress 8 aims to capture the progress that students make from the end of Key Stage 2 to the end of Key Stage 4. It is a type of value-added measure: their results are compared with those of others nationally with similar prior attainment. Students who have higher Attainment 8 scores compared to those with similar prior attainment will contribute positively to their school's Progress 8 score.

[364] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Polling of Key Stage 4 and 16-19 learners and parents)
[365] UK Parliament (2011) - The English Baccalaureate: Government response to the Committee's Fifth Report
[366] DfE (2025) - Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25

While Progress 8 seeks to incentivise the uptake of EBacc subjects, it does not require the full suite of subjects to be taken. Instead, it measures students' progress across eight qualifications grouped into three 'buckets':

- The first bucket contains English and Maths (double-weighted)
- The second bucket (the 'EBacc' bucket) contains three EBacc subjects (the sciences, languages and humanities)
- The third bucket contains three 'open' slots, which can include additional EBacc subjects, non-EBacc subjects and other approved qualifications such as Technical Awards.

The combination of the Maths and English bucket, plus the existing EBacc bucket, ensures that, in practice, young people must take English (taking English Language *and* Literature is incentivised), Maths and (at least Combined) Science, which are mandatory subjects, plus one other EBacc subject, such as History, Geography or a Language. Students are then able to select any other approved qualification. Typically, this will be a further three subjects if the student is taking nine qualifications, the most common number at Key Stage 4. We think that this represents a desirable balance between breadth and choice, securing both the academic core that is so important for young people's life chances but also the flexibility they need to support and reflect their diverse interests and desired pathways.

As we stated in our Interim Report, we are strongly committed to the Progress 8 measure. Our view remains that it supports both students' progress and curriculum breadth. We therefore recommend making no changes to the structure of Progress 8 or the composition of the 'buckets'. We recommend only that the 'EBacc' bucket is renamed 'Academic Breadth'.

## Inclusivity within performance measures

Supporting the needs and abilities of all children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) must be underpinned by an accountability system that captures and celebrates the progress of all of them and so incentivises schools to provide an inclusive curriculum.

We have heard that the pressure exerted by accountability and performance measures for schools to perform well in standardised assessments can act as a disincentive for them to admit or retain pupils with SEND, or can lead them to narrow the range of qualification pathways they offer, ultimately preventing access to subjects that may allow them to achieve and thrive.

While we believe that Progress 8 is working well and should remain unchanged, we are aware of some criticisms that the measure is not fully inclusive. The only

contextualisation within Progress 8 is prior attainment; other factors beyond a school's control are not taken into account, such as the proportion of students receiving free school meals or the proportion with SEND. Initiatives introduced by previous Governments that took account of such factors include the Contextual Value Added (CVA)[367] measure and Performance Scales (P Scales).[368] CVA was withdrawn in 2010/11 and P Scales underwent a phased removal from 2018/19 onwards (and was replaced by pre-key stage standards and the engagement model).[369]

The Review has heard concerns that there remains no clear way to recognise the progress or achievements of those with the highest levels of need. In addition, some concerns have been expressed that taking eight GCSE subjects is unrealistically challenging for some students and that Progress 8 inhibits flexibility in this respect.

Despite feedback regarding inclusivity in Progress 8, we consider that its focus on progress for all students irrespective of prior attainment, and its incentivising of curriculum breadth for every young person irrespective of background, remain laudable aims, supporting social justice and high standards for all.

Nevertheless, we have explored additional and alternative measures that might be implemented alongside Progress and Attainment 8. Our high-level appraisals of these can be found below. However, at present, we do not feel confident in recommending any other measures.

Instead, noting the Government's response to its consultation on school accountability reform, we welcome its commitment to developing a digital service that enables schools to benchmark and compare themselves with other, similar schools. We hope that this will foster more effective collaboration between schools, particularly those with similar intakes, and facilitate school to school improvement. In its development, we encourage the Department to draw on previous initiatives in this space such as the EEF's 'families of schools' tool when considering levels of contextualisation within this digital service – with an especial focus on inclusivity and pupil demographics.

We strongly endorse the development and piloting of this service, for both primary and secondary schools.

[367] CVA was a progress measure that reported pupil progress based on prior attainment as well as such things like special educational needs and/or disabilities, gender, first language, ethnicity, FSM status, and whether they were in care.
[368] P Scales were a set of performance descriptors used to assess the progress of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities who were working below the national curriculum level.
[369] Pre-key stage standards are a set of teacher assessment frameworks for pupils working below national curriculum assessment standards, but who are engaged in subject-specific study. The engagement model is a statutory assessment framework for pupils working below national curriculum assessment standards, but who are not engaged in subject-specific study.

The other options that we considered were:

- **An exemption from Progress 8:** we explored the possibility of recommending adjustments to the existing accountability framework to allow certain students to be exempt from the Progress 8 measure. Overall, we concluded that exemption-based options were not viable. They are unlikely to meaningfully impact a school's Progress 8 score unless an unreasonably large proportion of the cohort qualifies for exemption and each option presents significant challenges in terms of implementation and monitoring. There is also a risk that such approaches could exacerbate existing inequalities within the system, incentivising some schools to manipulate the process to improve their position in performance tables.
- **A new, flexible measure**: others have suggested introducing an alternative progress measure, such as Progress 6 (measuring progress for fewer subjects) which adjusts how attainment is measured so that students with SEND can contribute more positively to a school's Progress 8 score. However, such alternatives risk compromising breadth of subject choice for those with SEND (potentially consigning some students to the study of just English, Maths, Science and one other subject), and we have therefore rejected such options.

### Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Removes the EBacc performance measure and the associated EBacc entry and attainment headline accountability measures.
- Retains Progress 8 (and Attainment 8) with no changes to its structure or subject composition but renames the current EBacc bucket to 'Academic Breadth' bucket.
- Continues to develop initiatives related to similar schools, with a particular emphasis on supporting inclusive approaches within accountability measures.

## Primary assessment

As we observed in our Interim Report, the primary assessment system is broadly working well. The Review Panel believes that these assessments rightly focus on the key foundational skills of reading, writing, and Maths, which are essential to enable children and young people to succeed throughout their education and their lives.

Statutory assessments are important in holding schools to account for their pupils' progress and attainment and, alongside other national curriculum assessments taken in the earlier years, they help to ascertain how well pupils have learned the content of the

national curriculum. Responses to the Call for Evidence emphasised the importance of identifying gaps (as well as where pupils have progressed), and the Review Panel is keen to ensure that the information from these assessments is used effectively to aid this and enable these pupils to be well supported.

## Key Stage 1

At Key Stage 1, the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) focuses on assessing pupils' phonic knowledge and skill, and the extent to which they can apply these successfully to decode phonics. The effectiveness of phonics is well evidenced,[370] and, given the importance of children's security in reading for their educational progress, we consider it important that the check remains.

Some pupils cannot undertake the PSC, as the format requires them to decode aloud to the listening adult conducting the check. This means that there is no consistent way to assess pre- and non-verbal pupils on their decoding and where they need further support. Given the importance of a strong grounding in phonics, we recommend that the DfE and the Standards and Testing Agency (STA) explore ways that schools can assess non- and pre-verbal pupils' decoding and ensure greater scrutiny of their progress at this critical stage. We recommend that any alternative arrangements are administered in the school setting, and (as now) not included in published accountability measures. This will help to maintain the integrity of the PSC and ensure pupils who can undertake it continue to do so, while also making sure that those who cannot are still checked.

Optional national curriculum assessments (commonly referred to as SATs)[371] at the end of Key Stage 1 cover the English and Maths curricula. Schools can use these assessments to identify where pupils need support in reading, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and Maths as they move into Key Stage 2. These assessments have been optional at Key Stage 1 since 2023/24 and the DfE does not collect data on how many pupils take them. However, evidence from a 2024 Teacher Tapp survey suggests that many schools continue to use them, with 60% of the teachers surveyed indicating they would be administering them.[372] We support the decision of the DfE and the STA to continue to provide these optional assessments and recommend that they consider how best to encourage schools to make greater use of them.

## Key Stage 2

Key Stage 2 statutory assessments include the Multiplication Tables Check (MTC), taken in Year 4 to assess pupils' mastery of times tables, and the end of Key Stage 2 national curriculum assessments (commonly referred to as SATs) in Maths, English reading and

[370] EEF (2021) - Phonics
[371] National assessments taken in key stages 1-3 are officially called 'national curriculum assessments'. They are commonly referred to as 'SATs' by the sector, parents and the public.
[372] Schools Week (2025) - SATs: Primaries fail to opt out but won't be testing

grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS), alongside teacher assessments in English writing and Science.

The results help to assess whether pupils have learned the national curriculum content in English and Maths, but these assessments play a role in important accountability measures since they are used to determine Progress 8 scores in secondary schools. Over half (54%) of parents and carers of Key Stage 3 students found that the results from the Key Stage 2 assessments were useful in informing them about their child's progress, particularly parents and carers of children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.[373] Primary schools can access pupils' detailed results, including their responses to each question, as can secondary schools for incoming Year 7 students. We support the DfE and the STA's provision of this data to pupils' primary and future secondary schools, and recommend that they explore how to encourage schools to further use this information further to best support transition to Key Stage 3, including using it to inform curriculum planning. This could include providing schools with guidance and support to enable them to interpret the data and reviewing its format to enable efficient analysis.

We consider that the Key Stage 2 assessments are generally performing well, but the Review Panel sees scope to improve some of them. We are convinced it is essential that all pupils benefit from knowledge of multiplication tables, and that fluency is important in mathematical understanding. However, we have heard that some pupils with SEND have specific needs (such as processing difficulties) which makes the MTC inaccessible. As with our recommendation on the PSC, we encourage the STA to investigate if access arrangements can be refined for pupils with these specific needs so that schools can identify knowledge gaps in multiplication tables and offer relevant support.

We indicated in our Interim Report that we would explore how to improve the writing assessment and the GPS test, with a view to better evaluation of and support for developing pupils' writing. Our recommendations on changes to the English curriculum will be an important lever in supporting improvements in this area (see English). We note the DfE's new writing framework which aims to support teachers through a common approach to teaching writing. However, as we acknowledged in the Interim Report, assessment of the curriculum also influences what and how pupils are taught.

The significant impact of assessments on teaching and learning was emphasised in responses to the Call for Evidence, with particular focus on the GPS test. The national curriculum requires pupils to understand the grammatical terminology set out in the Programme of Study, and the GPS test is designed to assess this.[374] The Review Panel

[373] DfE (2025) - Parent, pupil and learner voice: December 2024. 54% of parents of Key Stage 3 pupils found Key Stage 2 assessments useful in informing them about their children's progress (42% did not). 62% of parents of children eligible for free school meals found Key Stage 2 results useful in informing them about their children's progress.

[374] Note that the assessment of grammar, punctuation and spelling is not entirely separate from teacher-assessed writing, as the teacher assessment framework evaluates pupils on their ability to employ these features correctly.

believes that grammar, punctuation and spelling are crucial to a strong foundation in literacy. However, although the current GPS test reliably assesses pupils' grammatical knowledge, it is not primarily designed to assess their use of grammar in their own writing. A frequent theme raised in the Call for Evidence was that the test has led to a disproportionate amount of classroom time being spent on teaching grammatical constructs in isolation, often at the expense of a more integrated approach.

We have explored a range of options to incentivise the teaching of grammar in a way that supports its application in writing, whilst also ensuring that pupils build a strong foundation of important content. We recommend replacing the existing GPS test with an amended version. This should retain those elements of the current test that encourage effective teaching and a separate spelling element, and it should integrate short composition tasks. This should encourage a more proportionate and applied approach to learning grammar, punctuation and spelling whilst developing good writing capabilities that use grammatical constructs effectively. By reducing overly theoretical grammatical terminology in the curriculum, we aim to ensure that the new test does not increase the volume of assessment.

Teacher-assessed writing should be retained, alongside the new GPS test, but with improvements. Contributions to the Call for Evidence showed support for teacher assessment and noted its benefits as an opportunity to assess pupils' authentic writing holistically across the year and for them to show their capabilities outside a timed test. The moderation process for teacher assessment also has benefits as it supports teachers' professional development and provides an opportunity for them to engage with peers, although stakeholders have indicated that moderation can be time-consuming.

We have also heard that the teacher assessment framework could be improved to support the teaching of effective writing. There is evidence that the framework lacks clarity and is open to misinterpretation, which can lead to inconsistent judgements.[375] This can contribute to distorted teaching, with significant time spent on asking pupils to repeatedly redraft a piece of writing until it meets all the criteria listed in the assessment framework. The teacher assessment framework would also need to be updated to reflect the revised English curriculum and its greater focus on fluency.

We believe that the benefits of teacher assessment can be maximised by strengthening the teacher assessment framework, to clarify requirements and improve the moderation process. The enhancements could support consistent, high-quality moderation, even in years where schools are not selected for external moderation and contribute to the reliability and consistency of externally moderated results. To improve the moderation system, the STA should explore options such as the feasibility of different models of external moderation (which could include using a national or external provider), strengthening peer moderation and providing greater guidance and materials to schools and local authorities. Any initiatives should be ambitious but mindful of resource pressures and teachers' workloads.

[375] Clarkson, R. (2024) - 'It's missing the heart of what writing is about': teachers' interpretations of writing assessment criteria.

### Recommendations

**Key Stage 1**

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures that the STA works with the DfE to find ways to encourage take-up of optional Key Stage 1 assessments.
- Ensures that the STA works with DfE to explore approaches for assessing progress for the small minority of pupils with certain SEND needs that make the Phonics Screening Check inaccessible. This assessment should be administered in the school setting.

**Key Stage 2**

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures that the STA works with DfE to explore if access arrangements can be refined for pupils with certain SEND that make the Multiplication Tables Check inaccessible. This assessment should continue to be administered in a school setting.
- Develops an improved teacher assessment framework to provide teachers with clarity and include a greater focus on writing fluency.
- Reviews external moderation processes and looks to strengthen peer moderation between schools, with the aim of embedding good practice to improve moderation in years where schools are not selected for external moderation and improving consistency between external judgements.
- Replaces the current GPS test with an amended test, which retains some elements of the current GPS test but with new tasks to better assess composition and application of grammar and punctuation.
    - Once the new test is established in schools, the DfE may wish to consider whether the role of the test in accountability should remain as stands, or whether any changes, such as including the new test in headline measures, should be explored.

## Secondary assessment

### Key Stage 3

As set out in ‘our view of the key stages’, evidence suggests that Key Stage 3 faces three broad and significant challenges:

- limited progress by students.
- poor curriculum continuity from Key Stage 2.
- its lower priority relative to Key Stage 4.

Our subject-level recommendations seek to remedy issues with curriculum coherence at Key Stage 3 to ensure better sequencing between primary and secondary schools. They also seek to deal with the volume of content at Key Stage 4, which contributes to curtailing the Key Stage 3 curriculum so that teaching GCSE content can begin early.[376]

Since Key Stage 3 assessments were cancelled in 2008, schools have developed and administered their own assessments.[377] However, we know that in a context of school resource challenges and given the high-stakes nature of Key Stage 4, Key Stage 3 receives less attention in a number of areas, including assessment. Ofsted's 2015 review found that systems and procedures to assess and monitor students' progress are not as well developed as at Key Stage 4 and beyond.[378] Whilst the absence of national assessment data at Key Stage 3 makes it difficult to monitor the impact of this on attainment, there is evidence that progress at Key Stage 3 is often slower than at Key Stage 2, particularly in core subjects such as English and Maths.[379]

Moving through key stages without a secure grasp of these subjects is having a detrimental effect on outcomes. For example, only 20% of students with low Key Stage 2 prior attainment went on to achieve grade 4 or above in both English and Maths GCSEs, compared to 72% of middle prior attainers and 96% of high prior attainers.[380] Four in 10 (40%) students do not achieve level 2 in one or both of English and Maths by the end of Key Stage 4 (see 16-19 Maths and English), without which they are less likely to progress to a sustained education, apprenticeship or employment destination after 16-19 study.[381]

Before GCSEs, the last formal assessment of progress in these foundational subjects is at the end of Key Stage 2. Given evidence that students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are at particular risk of falling behind their more affluent peers and making slower progress during Key Stage 3, it is critical that we examine all the levers to narrow this gap.[382] We therefore see an opportunity to support schools to identify key gaps in core English and Maths knowledge through diagnostic assessment

[376] UK Parliament (2023) - Requires improvement: urgent change for 11–16 education
[377] Teacher Tapp (2025) - Assessments in schools today
[378] Ofsted (2015) - Key stage 3: the wasted years?
[379] DfE (2011) - How do pupils progress during key stages 2 and 3?; EPI (2024) - Star Assessments Benchmarking Report 2022/23
[380] DfE (2025) - Key Stage 4 performance – based on 2023/24 data as pupils who were at the end of Key Stage 4 in 2024/25 did not take Key Stage 2 assessments due to the pandemic. Therefore, Key Stage 2 prior attainment data is not available for this cohort
[381] DfE (2025) - 16-18 destination measures, Academic year 2023/24
[382] Crawford, C., Macmillan, L. & Vignoles, A.(2016) - When and Why do Initially High Attaining Poor Children Fall Behind; FFT education datalab (2024) - School outcomes of "bright" 5-year-olds from poor backgrounds

and to use this information to better support students to secure these foundations before they move into Key Stage 4.

We believe that diagnostic assessments in English and Maths, focusing on the key elements of the Key Stage 3 curriculum needed for success at GCSE in these subjects, could help teachers to assess their students' strengths and weaknesses, and address any gaps in their understanding. These assessments should be tightly focused to avoid the need for annualisation of the Key Stage 3 curriculum, and to avoid any perception that what is assessed comprises all the Key Stage 3 content or completes Key Stage 3 study in these two subjects.

This is a new approach for this key stage, and we would expect that, once developed, this assessment would be trialled to ensure it fulfils its intended purpose and does not have unintended consequences. If shown to be effective, we would recommend it becomes mandatory, but that it is not included in published school-level data, so that all students benefit without schools facing undue pressure. Finally, this assessment should take place in Year 8, partway through Key Stage 3. This would give schools sufficient time to plan and implement support for students with gaps in their knowledge and ensure that they are well prepared to progress into Key Stage 4. This should also help to ensure that Year 9 focuses intensively on closing gaps in knowledge and skills, alongside teaching new content, so that students begin GCSE courses in Year 10 with secure foundations.

## Key Stage 4

The current Key Stage 4 assessment system has notable strengths that contribute to high standards and seek to ensure fairness for young people. Externally set and marked exams provide a fair and reliable indicator of what students know, understand and can do. They assess them in a standardised way and scripts are anonymous, reducing the risk that students' protected characteristics or socio-economic background affect how their performance is assessed. They also help to mitigate the risks of malpractice in completing assessments, an increasingly important consideration given the rise of generative AI. Written exams reduce the burden on teachers compared with other forms of assessment, such as coursework, and help limit the overall volume of assessment for students.

Polling undertaken for the Review showed that young people themselves value exams as they feel they are fair and give them the opportunity to demonstrate everything they have learned.[383] In addition, annual surveys conducted by Ofqual show that general qualifications (including GCSEs and A Levels) are valued by a range of stakeholders, including employers, teachers and head teachers, the general public, young people and universities. The latest wave of this data showed that GCSEs are a trusted qualification

[383] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Polling of Key Stage 4 and 16-19 learners and parents)

(76%), that they are well understood (72%) and that they are regarded as good preparation for further study (71%).[384]

Our recommendations focus on general qualifications (especially GCSEs), with vocational qualifications addressed in other sections (see Technical Awards). In addition, we have focused on change at Key Stage 4, given we heard very little concern regarding A Levels in our Call for Evidence and our sector engagement, in contrast to the significant concern we heard about Key Stage 4 (see Academic Pathway: A Levels, on pg 150). However, where relevant, the Government will need to consider coherence between general qualifications, including AS qualifications and A Levels, in the light of any changes to GCSEs.

## Volume of exam assessment

The Review has identified a number of areas for improvement. As set out in our Interim Report, the amount of time spent on exam assessment at Key Stage 4 is excessive. This was a key theme raised in responses to our Call for Evidence and our wider stakeholder engagement.[385] Based on the five most popular combinations of subjects (and accounting for variation between exam boards), students in England typically sit between 24 and 31 hours of external exams, typically taking between eight to 10 subjects in Year 11.[386] Exact figures will depend on a number of factors and may be higher for students who are eligible for extra time, but some estimates are higher still. For example, OCR estimates this to be 31.5 hours.[387] Whilst these estimates are comparable with Singapore (up to 31.5 hours), they are significantly higher than the time spent sitting exams in other high-performing jurisdictions such as Ireland (16 hours), New Zealand (18 hours) and Canada (Alberta) (10 hours).[388] Given the impact on teaching time in Year 11 and England's outlier status in this context, we are determined to resolve it.

We have heard from our Call for Evidence and our polling that the volume of exams at the end of Key Stage 4 can exacerbate the pressure that students feel. Our polling found that whilst around half (52%) of students felt that the number of exams allowed them to demonstrate their knowledge and ability, over a third (37%) felt that there were too many (and just 5% felt there were too few).[389] In addition, half of those who completed their

[384] Ofqual (2024) - Perceptions of A levels, GCSEs and other qualifications: wave 22
[385] E.g. Social Market Foundation (2024) - Testing patience: Reducing the burden of the English school curriculum; OCR (2024) - Striking the Balance: A review of 11 – 16 curriculum and assessment in England
[386] The figure on exam times is illustrative and based on the five most popular combinations of eight GCSE subjects in 2018 (eight was the average number of GCSEs taken). It accounts for variation between different exam boards' specifications and subjects taken. Exact figures will vary depending on the number of GCSEs taken, in which subjects, and which exam board specifications are included. Figures do not include non-exam assessment (NEA) which varies in duration considerably across subjects. Note that some countries do not assess all subjects studied (some assessing as few as four) and some will have higher volumes of other forms of assessment, such as coursework, alongside exam assessment.
[387] OCR (2024) - Striking the Balance: A review of 11 – 16 curriculum and assessment in England
[388] OCR (2024) - Striking the Balance: A review of 11 – 16 curriculum and assessment in England See alongside footnote 374 ('the figure on exam times is illustrative….')
[389] Curriculum and Assessment Review interim report – Key Stage 4 and 16–19 polling

Key Stage 4 exams or assessments in summer 2024 found it difficult (41%) or very difficult (10%) to cope with stress during the exam period.[390] However, this should be balanced with the fact that evidence suggesting a causal link between exams and poor wellbeing is contested. Analysis has found that, when accounting for age, the causal link between mental ill-health and exams is weak.[391] Nonetheless, we have considered students' experience of exams in developing our recommendations.

It is important to note that the volume, structure and nature of subject content play a key role in the volume of assessment and we address this through our recommendations on curriculum subjects (see curriculum recommendations by subject). The number of subjects that students study also has a bearing on the number of exams they sit and therefore the overall volume of exam assessment. There is no fixed number of subjects that students should study at Key Stage 4. Most commonly, they take nine qualifications, with Progress 8 incentivising eight of these.[392] However, the latest data shows that 26% of students take 10 or more Key Stage 4 qualifications.[393] We encourage schools to support students in making choices about the number of subjects they take to ensure that the volume of content and assessment in Key Stage 4 is manageable.

However, the Review is clear that assessment design choices (such as the number of components, the number of questions or tasks and the type of tasks set in assessments) will play a key role in reducing the burden of exam assessment, and it is a priority that we address the volume of exams. In analysis submitted to the Review, Ofqual considered that a reduction of 10% is feasible with current content levels.[394] In combination with our recommendations on curriculum content, we believe that it may be possible to go further than this. We are therefore proposing that the DfE and Ofqual seek to reduce overall GCSE exam volume by at least 10% using assessment levers. This can and must be done while maintaining high levels of reliability and without a negative impact on fairness, system resilience, students' experience, and teaching and learning.

We are aware that reducing exam time while maintaining high levels of reliability will be more straightforward to achieve in some subjects than others. Considerations should be made on a subject-by-subject basis. We propose that Ofqual introduces a new principle which places consideration of the volume of exam assessment at the heart of assessment design. Finally, acknowledging the importance of students having more than one opportunity to demonstrate what they can do, and to mitigate the risk that poor performance on the day of an exam determines an individual's entire grade, we recommend that at least two assessment components remain for each subject.

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[390] Curriculum and Assessment Review interim report – Key Stage 4 and 16–19 polling
[391] Institute for Public Policy Research IPPR (2023) - Balancing act: Navigating the tensions in our school system; Jerrim, J. (2021) - The mental health of adolescents in England: How does it vary during their time at school?; Steare, T., Gutiérrez-Muñoz C, Sullivan, A., Lewis, G. (2023) - The association between academic pressure and adolescent mental health problems: A systematic review
[392] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[393] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[394] This analysis is based on a combination of 8-9 GCSEs.

## Method of assessment

Externally set and marked exams remain the fairest and most reliable method of assessment, particularly in safeguarding disadvantaged students from systemic biases that can arise in coursework-based evaluation.[395] Generative artificial intelligence (AI) has further heightened concerns around the authenticity of some forms of non-exam assessment, making it increasingly difficult to ensure that submitted work is the student's own. It is right, therefore, that exams remain the principal form of assessment.

GCSEs include content which is authentic to subject disciplines, such as performance or creation of outputs, and which is vital for progression. Decisions on assessment methods for each qualification are based on the nature and structure of its subject content, some of which cannot be validly assessed through written exams alone. The Review Panel is clear that subjects should reflect the authentic nature of each discipline, especially in areas where the influence of generative AI is minimal or non-existent. For example, we should ensure that performance-based components, such as devised pieces or choreography, should remain central to Drama and Dance. Similarly, students should have the opportunity to perform as part of their Music assessment.

To ensure assessments are fit for purpose, a subject-by-subject approach should be taken to ensure that the content, and therefore the assessment, reflects what young people should learn, as set out in our subject-level recommendations. We recognise the risks posed by generative AI to non-exam assessment, and therefore there should not be any expansion of written coursework. However, AI risks must be balanced with the need for assessment methods that are most valid for a subject discipline. We encourage the DfE and Ofqual to continue working together to explore the range of assessment methods available whilst balancing the risks presented by AI.

On-screen assessment methods are used in limited parts of the assessment system. Calls for greater integration of technology in assessment was a theme in responses to our Call for Evidence. There may be benefits from wider integration in the future, including improving the accessibility of exams for students with SEND, the potential for adaptive testing and the opportunity to validly assess a broader set of knowledge and skills. We recognise that evidence of the potential for wider implementation, including adaptive testing,[396] is still limited and that wider implementation would have considerable delivery implications for schools and colleges. In addition, evidence of the impact of school closures in the pandemic, where students had to learn remotely, highlighted stark disparities in their access to IT at home.[397] The Review Panel is therefore mindful of the potential equity risks of moving to a digital system if some students are more familiar with

[395] Wyness, G. (2021), Should we abolish GCSEs?, No 14, CEPEO Briefing Note Series, UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities
[396] Ydesen, C. (2022) - New national tests for the Danish public school system – Tensions between renewal and orthodoxy before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic
[397] For example, The Sutton Trust (2021) - Remote Learning: the Digital Divide; NFER and Nuffield Trust (2023) - Schools Responses to Covid-19: Pupil Engagement in Remote Learning

technology than others. We welcome the ongoing work being conducted by the DfE and Ofqual to explore and innovate with digital assessment while balancing these considerations, and we encourage them to consider opportunities to improve accessibility for students with SEND.

## Accessibility of assessment for students with SEND

Awarding organisations design and develop assessments that are as accessible as possible, in line with their requirement to have due regard to equalities legislation, including the Equality Act 2010.[398] As the regulator for awarding organisations, Ofqual publishes requirements regarding this duty.[399] Where accessibility requirements cannot be fully met through assessment design alone, disabled students are legally entitled to reasonable adjustments (a form of access arrangement). Reasonable adjustments are intended to support them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills at the level required by the qualification. Another type of access arrangement is a special consideration, for which students who are not disabled can also apply, for example, in the case of injury or temporary illness.

A common theme from Call for Evidence responses was concern about the accessibility of assessments for students with SEND. Many concerns stem from the subject content, including the volume of memorising required. Given the interdependency between subject content and assessment design it is important that accessibility is considered and built in from the outset. We also recognise that different organisations hold different responsibilities in relation to the accessibility of qualifications and their assessments. Ofqual, the DfE and awarding organisations should continue to work collaboratively when developing updated specifications for GCSEs. This joint approach should ensure that qualifications are as accessible as possible and that the relevant organisations have a holistic view of the interaction between subject content, assessment, and the impact on teaching and learning.

## Provision of formulae and equations in exams

The subject content documents for subjects such as Physics, Combined Science and Maths indicate which formulae students must memorise and therefore not be provided with in exams. In 2022, in response to the pandemic's impact on learning, the expectation that students should memorise these formulae was disapplied, thus removing the requirement for students to recall these formulae but retaining the expectation that they should understand and use them. Ofqual consulted on the provision of these formulae and equations in 2024 to inform its onward approach. Stakeholders identified a range of benefits, including enabling a greater focus on applying formulae

[398] The National Archives (2017) - The Equality Act 2010 (General Qualifications Bodies) (Appropriate Regulator and Relevant Qualifications) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2017 - Explanatory Memorandum
[399] Ofqual (2017) - Specifications in relation to the reasonable adjustment of general qualifications

and decreasing the stress associated with the exams, as well as some concerns, such as the format and accessibility of the equations and formulae provided, and the belief that memorising formulae and equations is important for understanding them. Ofqual's consultation did not identify significant assessment issues relating to providing these formulae.[400] Following this, the DfE extended the provision of these sheets to 2027, with the approach in subsequent years to be informed by the outcome of this Review.[401]

There is evidence that transferring knowledge to long-term memory can reduce cognitive load and supports the learning of new, related concepts, and recalling this knowledge is also shown to benefit learning.[402] Alongside the benefits of formulae sheets identified by stakeholders in Ofqual's consultation, the Review Panel believes that decisions on the future of this arrangement should be informed by careful consideration of what students should know and learn and of the benefits of memorising concepts. We therefore recommend that, as part of subject-level work conducted by the DfE following the Review, subject content experts consider which formulae students should be required to memorise and recall and which they should be able to apply when they are provided.

## Recommendations

**Key Stage 3**

We recommend that the Government:

- Introduces diagnostic assessment for key components of Maths and English to be taken during Year 8 to support teachers to address students' needs and ensure that they are well prepared to progress into Key Stage 4.
- Commissions the design and trialling of the test, with a view to making it mandatory if the pilots demonstrate that this is an effective approach.

**Key Stage 4**

Volume of assessment

We recommend that the Government:

- Works with Ofqual, seeking to reduce overall exam time by at least 10%, focusing on assessment design choices to deliver this reduction, and going further than this where possible. This should be considered on a subject-by-

[400] Ofqual (2023) - Proposed changes to the assessment of mathematics, physics and combined science GCSEs in 2024
[401] DfE, Ofqual & The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP (2024) - Additional support materials for GCSE exams
[402] Racsmány, M., Szőllősi, Á., & Bencze, D. (2018) - Retrieval Practice Makes Procedure From Remembering: An Automatization Account of the Testing Effect; Hultberg, P., Calonge, D. & Lee, A. (2018) - Promoting Long-lasting Learning Through Instructional Design; Cognitive science approaches in the classroom: A review of the evidence (summary): EEF (2021) - Cognitive science approaches in the classroom

subject basis, ensuring minimal impact on reliability, fairness and teaching and learning.

- Works with Ofqual to introduce a design principle that considers the volume of exam assessment as a priority. The DfE and Ofqual should explore a range of options within each subject to seek to minimise exam length whilst ensuring minimal negative impact on reliability, fairness, teaching and learning, and system resilience.
- Ensures that in implementing the above recommendations, each subject retains at least two assessment components.

Method of assessment

We recommend that the Government:

- Continues to employ the principle that non-exam assessment should be used only when it is the only valid way to assess essential elements of a subject.
- Ensures that assessment approaches continue to be derived from the nature and structure of subject content, ensuring that what is assessed reflects what is most important for students to learn and do. Changes to the balance of assessment should only be made where this reflects changes to the content.
- Ensures that the DfE and Ofqual work closely with the wider education sector to explore how core aspects of subject content can be retained and assessed whilst managing and mitigating the risk of generative AI.
- Ensures that the DfE and Ofqual continue to consider the full range of options for assessment methods, including non-exam assessment, where it would be necessary to mitigate the risks posed by generative AI.
- Ensures that the DfE and Ofqual continue to work together to explore potential for innovation in on-screen assessment in GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications, particularly where this could further support accessibility for students with SEND and where this could reduce exam volume in the future. We recommend they continue to review the evidence and carefully consider risks and benefits.

Accessibility for students with SEND

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures that Ofqual, awarding organisations and the DfE work together to consider how awarding organisations can build accessibility into the design of new specifications for GCSEs, AS and A Levels.

Provision of formulae and equations in exams

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures that, when updating the Maths and Science GCSEs, subject experts evaluate each formula and equation to determine whether students should be required to memorise and recall it, or whether assessment should focus on their ability to apply it when provided.

# 16-19 education

16-19 study marks an important transition point for learners as they progress to further education and specialise in areas that align with their progression aspirations and prior attainment. The 16-19 cohort is diverse and learners study across a range of academic, technical, vocational and mixed pathways at levels 3, 2, 1 and entry level. In addition to their core qualifications at 16-19, all learners should have access to broader non-qualification opportunities to set them up for work or study and to thrive as adults.

The Review looked across the full range of pathways and levels of study, focusing on the areas that we heard need most attention. The section below therefore opens with level 3 study. It focuses on vocational level 3 pathways before moving on to address academic and technical pathways and then covers level 2, level, 1 and entry level. The report discusses level 2 Maths and English study at 16-19 and touches on non-qualification activity.

## Level 3

Level 3 programmes remain the most popular choice for 16-19 learners, with 62% of 16-year-olds studying at level 3 (increasing to 66% for 17-year-olds) across a range of academic, technical and vocational programmes. Among 16-year-olds in England in 2024:

- 34% were studying A Levels or AS qualifications only (an academic pathway).
- 3% were studying T Levels only (a technical pathway which is expected to grow as T Levels mature).
- 25% were studying vocational or mixed pathways comprising either A Levels or AS qualifications and Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) (10%) or other level 3 qualifications only (16%).[403]

The Review Panel thinks it is important that as many learners as possible who have achieved level 2 (five GCSEs at grade 4 or above or the equivalent) should be supported to study at level 3. This is because those who study qualifications at level 3 are, on average, more likely to progress into sustained education or employment than those studying at level 2.[404] Completing level 3 programmes also has a positive impact on a learner's future earnings. Evidence suggests that completing level 3 qualifications provides a significant wage premium, even after controlling for other factors.[405]

[403] DfE (2025) – Participation in education and training and employment 'Other level 3 qualifications' includes AGQs and Tech Levels, in addition to other qualifications that are not eligible for inclusion in 16-18 school and college performance tables.
[404] DfE (2025) - 16-18 destination measures, Academic year 2023/24
[405] Battiston, A., Gavan, C., Hedges, S. & Patrignani, P. (2019) - The value of progression in further education

## Existing level 3 pathways: the case for a third pathway

Reforms under the previous Government sought to streamline level 3 study into technical or academic qualifications, with no space for vocational qualifications.[406] To meet the needs of learners not exclusively taking A Levels or T Levels, it also announced the introduction of Alternative Academic Qualifications (AAQs) and Technical Occupation Qualifications (TOQs),[407] sitting in the academic and technical pathways respectively and replacing existing AGQs, Tech Levels, and other applied/vocational qualifications.

We have heard clearly that moving the level 3 system towards two main pathways (academic and technical) does not serve all sectors and occupations well and may disadvantage some learners. Currently, 25% of 16-year-olds studying at level 3 take programmes that do not contain either an A Level or a T Level.[408] We know that the characteristics of these learners are different from those taking A Levels and T Levels. A higher proportion of them have special educational needs (SEN) (10% compared to 6% for A Levels and 9% for T Levels), a higher proportion come from disadvantaged backgrounds (24% compared to 14% for A Levels and 23% for T Levels) and a lower proportion have achieved Maths and English GCSE grade 4 by the end of Key Stage 4 (79% compared to 97% for A Levels and 92% for T Levels).[409]

Given the characteristics of this cohort, and the importance of level 3 study to life chances, it is important that the profile of prior GCSE attainment of the current cohort of level 3 learners maps across to the future system so that as many of them as possible are supported to access high-quality level 3 pathways. This includes those studying programmes where achieving GCSE grade 4 in Maths and English at Key Stage 4 is not necessary to start level 3.

Although some learners studying vocational qualifications, such as AGQs and Tech Levels, share broadly similar characteristics with those taking T Levels,[410] we should not assume that all learners studying vocational qualifications have the same aspirations or interests. T Levels are focused on specific occupations and thus require learners to choose a specific occupation at age 16, which is positive for those learners who know what career pathway they want to pursue. However, for learners who do not know, or who do not want to take T Levels, we think there is benefit in giving them the opportunity to study broader vocational and applied/creative qualifications, and to pursue routes and occupations not currently served by T Levels.

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[406] This is in addition to apprenticeships, which are outside the scope of the Review.
[407] Ofqual (2023) - Alternative Academic Qualifications and Technical Occupation Qualifications Qualification Level Conditions
[408] DfE (2025) - 'Participation Institutions and Qualifications' from 'Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18'
[409] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex) - A Level learners refer to A Level and AS qualification learners.
[410] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)

Additionally, providers told us that the applied nature of the teaching and assessment methods of existing vocational qualifications makes them more suitable for a broader range of learners and improves accessibility and engagement. We have not heard sufficient evidence that these applied approaches will continue under the existing plans for level 3 across A Levels, T Levels, AAQs or TOQs.

AAQs and TOQs, introduced in August 2025, have been designed to sit in the academic and technical pathways respectively and complement A Levels and T Levels. However, the Review has heard concerns from stakeholders about their introduction, notably that they are intended to be available only in a small number of subject areas. There is also a lack of clarity about how these qualifications could be combined to create cohesive study programmes and, while AAQs are intended to sit in the academic pathway, their branding makes it unclear whether they are applied or academic in nature. We were concerned to hear from providers that the presence of some AAQ subject areas (for example, Human Biology) which have strong links to A Level alternatives (such as Biology) is confusing learners about which qualification to study. We are concerned that some young people might not understand the implications of their choices between these subjects for university admission and/or pathways beyond level 3.

Whilst the evidence shows the importance of offering a vocational pathway, we also heard through wider engagement that some qualifications in the current level 3 vocational pathway vary in quality, with some (particularly those excluded from performance tables) recording sustained positive destination rates as low as 28%.[411] Research from the Nuffield Foundation also found that, even after controlling for differences between students, those studying just (the unreformed) BTEC qualifications were less likely to perform well at university compared to those on A Level only programmes.[412] However, research in this field remains complex and contested. For example, research had also shown that holding level 3 vocational qualifications were associated with positive labour market outcomes and that BTEC qualifications often act as a stepping stone for further study and education.[413]

As research from the National Education Opportunities Network shows, for the learners who do succeed in higher education, BTECs and other AGQs may have played an important role in widening participation and access.[414] However, existing vocational offers are complex and hard to navigate. In 2024/25 there were 1,981 qualifications funded for

[411] DfE (2022) - Detailed destinations of 16 to 18-year-olds in Further Education, Academic year 2018/19
[412] Nuffield Foundation (2022) - Educational choices at 16–19 and adverse outcomes at university. This study reported on outcomes before Applied General Qualifications were introduced, which brought new criteria to improve consistency and rigour across vocational level 3 qualifications (such as the BTEC National offered by Pearson).
[413] Patrignani, P., Conlon, G. & Hedges, S. (2017) - The earnings differentials associated with vocational education and training using the Longitudinal Education Outcomes data; Patrignani, P., Hedges, S. & Conlon, G. (2018) - Further analysis of the earnings differentials associated with BTECs; Patrignani, P., Battiston, A. & Conlon, G. (2019) - BTECs, higher education and labour market outcomes using the Longitudinal Education Outcome (LEO) dataset
[414] NEON (2021) - Will abolishing BTECs mean reversing widening access to higher education?

level 3 study across 14 different qualification types.[415] The Review heard that awarding organisations do not have uniform expectations about the content of current vocational qualifications and that, to resolve this, content must be clear at a national level. We heard of varied grading structures between different qualifications and a lack of clear Information, Advice and Guidance. This makes the system confusing for learners, their parents and carers, employers and FE/HE providers and undermines the credibility and currency of these qualifications. Polling conducted by the DfE among young people who received their 16-19 results in summer 2024 revealed that approximately 1 in 5 learners (19%) felt they lacked sufficient information and guidance to make well-informed subject choices.[416] Additionally, Ofqual's research shows that 14% of employers report having 'no understanding at all' and a further 38% have 'little or not very good understanding' of vocational and technical qualifications in their sector.[417]

## Size of qualifications

The size of a qualification is defined by its guided learning hours (GLH). Providers told us that having a range of qualifications of different sizes can make the system more complex to understand but also ensures appropriate and flexible options for all learners.[418]

We heard that small qualifications (fewer than 360 GLH) offer providers flexibility in tailoring study programmes to learners' needs and aspirations. For example, we heard positive examples of small vocational qualifications being combined, including with A Levels or with continued study of level 2 Maths and/or English, where necessary, to form a coherent level 3 study programme. The option to combine multiple small qualifications can be beneficial. However, we also heard that, in practice, many providers discourage such study programmes because of the risk of incoherence and lack of clear progression destinations.

Similarly, whilst the option remains for learners to take two small qualifications alongside level 2 Maths and/or English, the Review would be concerned if this was recommended as a full study programme (except for learners with specific requirements and/or high levels of need). The Review heard that for small vocational subjects to have value they would need to be offered in a sufficiently broad range of subjects and would need to be occupationally sector-based. This would prevent learners from taking qualifications in subject areas that are too specialised for building comprehensive study programmes, or from which meaningful progression could be facilitated.

The Review heard mixed evidence on medium-size qualifications (between 361 and 720 GLH). Medium qualifications are either 'nested' as part of an overall large qualification

[415] DfE (2025) - Qualification Downloads - List of Qualifications approved for funding
[416] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Polling of Key Stage 4 and 16-19 learners and parents); DfE (2021) - Young people's experiences of careers Information, Advice and Guidance
[417] Ofqual (2025) - Perceptions of Vocational and Technical Qualifications in England - wave 7
[418] Including, facilitating continued study of level 2 Maths and English when needed.

(where learners study a core medium qualification which they can top up by completing additional units) or are standalone qualifications. In 2023/24, 61,000 16-year-olds were enrolled on medium qualifications. Students taking medium qualifications are less likely to have achieved full level 2 and less likely to have achieved level 2 in both English and Maths compared to students taking large qualifications, but there is relatively little difference between medium and large applied qualifications in the proportions of students eligible for FSM or SEND.[419]

The Review heard positive examples of 'nested' medium qualifications. Providers gave examples of where medium qualifications have facilitated a pathway for some young people to build up to a large qualification, whilst also ensuring that those unable to do so leave with a recognisable qualification which has been banked. Anecdotally, we heard that this may include learners with SEND or those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The above data somewhat supports this, but the Review did not hear clear-enough evidence on the demographics of the cohort of learners taking these qualifications to judge fully whether they act as a pathway to widen participation.

The Review also took evidence on standalone medium qualifications. Stakeholders, notably providers, told the Review that these qualifications can be used in combination with a small qualification or continued study of level 2 Maths and/or English. The Review did not hear clear enough evidence either way to suggest that outcomes for learners who combine existing standalone medium qualifications with a small qualification are better or worse than those for learners taking either a large programme or three small qualifications.

In addition to the need for small qualifications, providers shared their strong views that existing large qualifications (more than 721 GLH) bring unique benefits for learners studying some subjects, with calls for similar programmes to be retained in any new vocational pathway. In 2023/24, there were 83,000 16-year-old enrolments on large qualifications.[420] In some subject areas, the key benefits presented to the Review of these large qualifications included the following:

- Large technical or vocational qualifications can carry weight with employers, FE and HE providers, allowing learners to demonstrate the breadth and depth of their knowledge which can be benchmarked consistently against that of other learners taking the same large qualification (compared to a combination of different small qualifications).
- Large qualifications allow learners to study a qualification within an occupational sector, with a holistic design and appropriately sequenced content. This allows

[419] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)
[420] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex). To note, individual learners may be enrolled on multiple qualifications. Figures include T Levels where in 2023/24 almost 12,000 16-year-olds took T Levels DfE (2025) - 'Participation Institutions and Qualifications' from 'Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18'

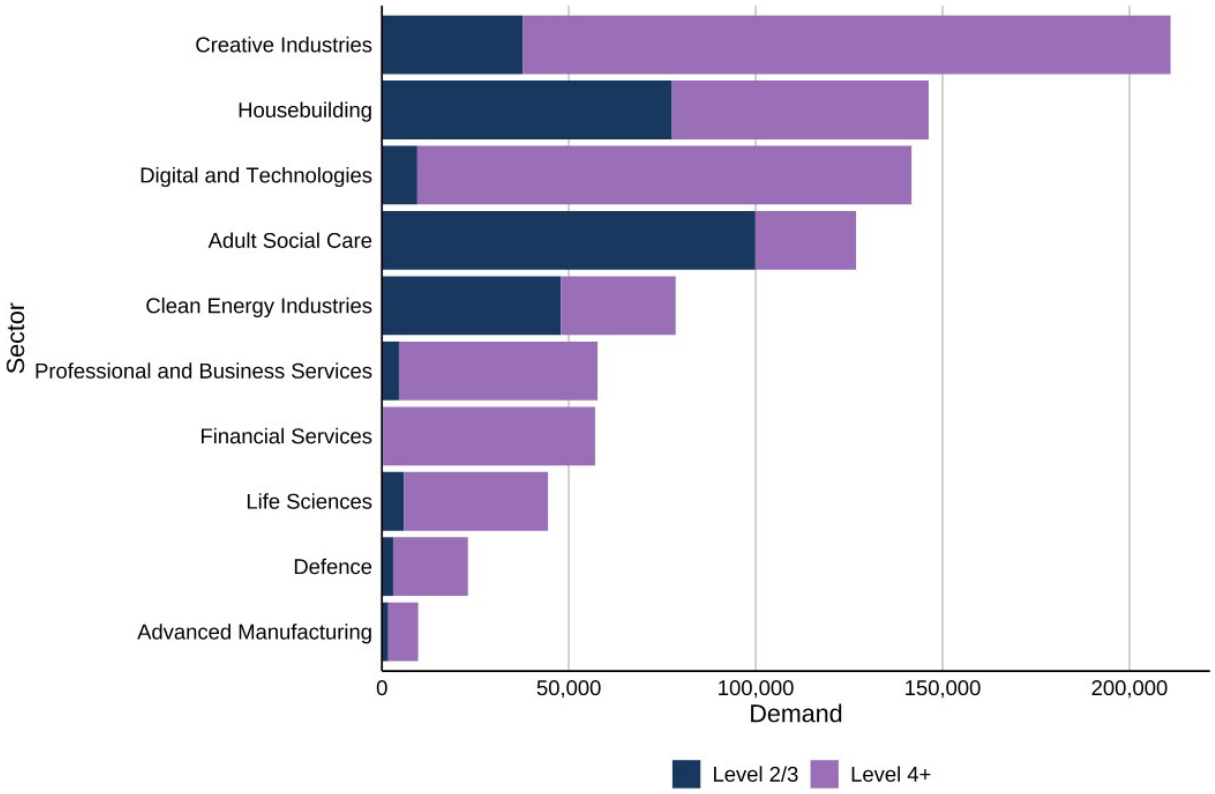
qualifications to provide them with both high-level and detailed content, and to avoid content repetition, which would not be possible in a system offering only small qualifications.

- For learners who know which sector they are interested in, large qualifications can be especially motivating as they can develop a depth of knowledge and skills, and they trust that their programme's components are coherent.
- Learners taking T Levels have the opportunity to develop technical skills based on content aligned to occupational standards, covering sector-level (route) content and content for the occupational specialism.
- Learners have the opportunity to reap the benefits of large qualifications in sector areas where a T Level does not currently exist.

## Subject areas

The Review also took evidence about the subject areas that could be especially important in a vocational route. Data on skills gaps presented to the Review shows that a strengthened vocational pathway will support filling skills gaps in the future. The four priority occupations with the largest projected additional employment between 2025 and 2030 for level 2 and level 3 are Adult Social Care, House Building, Clean Energy and Creative Industries, as shown in Figure 8.

**Figure 8. Additional employment in priority occupations between 2025 and 2030 by expected education level[421]**




Similarly, the recently published Industrial Strategy lists eight sectors with the 'highest potential': Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Energy Industries, Creative Industries, Defence, Digital and Technologies, Financial Services, Life Sciences, and Professional and Business Services.[422] Not all these sectors are fully served by A Levels or T Levels, although many are. Further qualifications that exist may not cover the specific sectors and so alternative qualifications in vocational pathways may be beneficial, particularly for matching learners' aspirations with skills needs.

Last, the Review is concerned about the recent rise in numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)[423] and wants to ensure suitable pathways are available for all learners. A strengthened and clearly defined vocational pathway should ensure that learners who need a broad vocational or mixed pathway have high-quality opportunities whilst also supporting future skills pipelines. Taking this evidence together, the Review is convinced that a credible and meaningful vocational pathway must remain at level 3 which provides valuable progression opportunities, assessed by methods that support the applied nature of the content. However, we are clear that learners and employers are not currently provided with a high-quality, coherent vocational offer

[421] Skills England (2025) - Assessment of priority skills to 2030
[422] Department for Business and Trade (2025) - Industrial Strategy
[423] Office for National Statistics (2025) - Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK; OECD (2025) - Education at a Glance 2025: United Kingdom

that reflects the aspirations and confidence in strong outcomes that such qualifications should serve.

## Vocational pathway: V Levels

We therefore propose a revised pathway, which provides aspirational, coherent, recognised and respected vocational and applied qualifications, to sit alongside A Levels and T Levels. These qualifications, which we recommend calling 'V Levels', should be broad, sector-based, and applied, and support learners' effective progress to a wide range of destinations, including related work-based training or apprenticeships, related further/higher education, or employment. Given their anticipated sector focus, the content for V Levels should be clearly defined, up to date, of proven relevance to the workplace and to the economy and delivered consistently across different awarding organisations.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Introduces a revised third pathway at level 3 to sit alongside the academic and technical pathways. This pathway should be based on new qualifications, which we recommend calling V Levels:
    - V Levels should provide high-quality qualifications for those young people that want a broader or mixed level 3 pathway with applied components. They should sit alongside A Levels and T Levels as a coherent third pathway at level 3. V Levels should have employer, further/higher education credibility, and be designed for longevity. To ensure this, V Levels should be regulated by Ofqual and content should be linked to occupational standards at a broad, sector level.
    - V Levels should meet a range of ambitious quality criteria that ensure that they provide the knowledge and skills required for learners to successfully progress to related employment or further study at a higher level. Destination outcomes should be key among these. Providers should also seek to develop appropriate employer encounters and work experience as part of learners' overall study programme, as per current practice.
- Considers learners who have SEND or face other barriers to education to ensure that V Levels are inclusive by design.

**Recommendations on the design of V Levels**

- To deliver quality and breadth effectively, we recommend that content is nationally set and broadly linked to sector-level occupational standards. The Government should explore basing the content on part of one standard, or parts of multiple standards, recognising that the qualifications are not designed to achieve occupational entry competence, but to support the ambitions of young people and sector-level jobs growth outlined by Skills England.

**Size**

- We recommend that a majority of V Level qualifications should be small (e.g. 360 GLH, aligning them with A Levels). This will give learners the opportunity to combine multiple V Levels into a single study programme, or to combine V Levels with A Levels or with continued study towards level 2 in Maths and/or English as required.
- In addition to small qualifications, we also see the need for V Levels in large qualification sizes in some vocational and creative areas where there are no T Levels. The Government should consult on subject areas and on the need for these qualifications in particular sectors. Including, on opportunities to offer 'partial recognition' for learners who complete the first year of their studies but are unable to progress to the second year.
- The Review's position is therefore that medium (nested or standalone) qualifications are unlikely to be needed in the future landscape. However, given the scale of the present offer and the apparent use for access, we recommend that the Government carefully considers the landscape and models impacts before any removal.

**Subject areas**

- We recommend that the Government consult on the principles by which subjects will be determined. This should consider employer needs and benefits to learners and could include criteria such as subjects in priority areas for skills demand. Our expectation is that to fulfil the purpose of building sector-based pathways, V Levels should be available in a wide range of subject areas (broader than the existing/planned AAQ and TOQ subjects) and suggest that the number of subject areas should be broadly comparable to the number of subjects offered as A Levels. To ensure that providers can build strong and coherent study programmes for learners, we recommend that the Government works with the sector to model potential subject combinations that would lead to particular progression outcomes and to look at rules of combination.

**Assessment and grading**

- V Levels should be assessed in ways which are appropriate to the (applied) nature of the content of these qualifications. Achievement should be consistently evidenced in well understood ways, and therefore the Government should work with Ofqual to design V Level assessments with consistent grading language, recognising there will be a necessary period of transition.

**Transition and existing qualifications**

- The Review has heard substantial evidence about the volume of change in the sector. We have therefore sought to avoid unnecessary upheaval, and we recommend that the Government carefully consider how the transition to V Levels can be implemented without causing unnecessary disruption. The Government should consult on the best way to introduce V Levels, including opportunities for awarding organisations to build on existing high-performing qualifications that work well now and deliver strong destination outcomes, when submitting V Level qualifications for approval, so that the benefits of strong existing offers can be maintained. Until V Levels are introduced, we recommend that existing qualifications with strong destination outcomes remain in the system to minimise disruption.

In addition to its work on a strengthened vocational pathway at level 3, the Review has identified opportunities to strengthen further the academic and technical pathways at level 3.

## Academic pathway: A Levels

A Levels remain a popular choice. In 2024, 34% of 16-year-olds in England were studying only A Level or AS qualifications.[424] The Review has heard that A Levels are well-respected and widely recognised academic qualifications that have strong progression outcomes. We have heard from subject associations and Learned Societies that A Levels offer a wide portfolio of valuable academic subjects that support higher learning and the economy. In the academic year 2022/23, 82% of learners in state-funded schools who took A Levels (and including AS qualifications) progressed to higher education by age 19.[425] We heard very little concern about A Levels through the Call for Evidence and our sector engagement. Therefore, we do not recommend significant changes to them, but where necessary the Government should update A Level content in line with GCSE subject content changes as the Review recommends (see curriculum recommendations by subject).

[424] DfE (2025) - Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18, Calendar year 2024
[425] DfE (2024) - Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2022/23

Following reforms to A Levels in 2018, a small number of learners continue to study AS qualifications as standalone qualifications, although these currently make up around 7% of the total A Level and AS qualification entries by students in state-funded schools.[426] The Review heard that increased breadth during academic 16-19 study could be achieved by encouraging learners to study for an AS qualification in their first year of 16-19 study. However, others raised concerns about the volume of resource needed to provide this and the disruption it would cause and questioned how necessary the additional qualifications are to support learners' progression. Given this and the lack of evidence that problems about breadth are currently hindering progression and outcomes, we are not making any formal recommendations in this area, but we encourage the Government to keep AS qualifications under review.

## Technical pathway: T Levels

T Levels continue to establish themselves as large technical qualifications. In 2024, 3% of 16-year-olds in England were studying T Levels.[427] Although this is a small proportion of the overall cohort, the Review was encouraged to see the growth from previous years as T Levels continue to be rolled out and embedded. The Review heard from stakeholders that they provide high-quality opportunities for their learners. Employers particularly value the level of co-creation in designing them, whilst learners speak highly of the industry placement opportunities. These beneficial and distinctive features are helping to establish T Levels as a strong brand. We support the DfE's continuing work to improve the accessibility of T Levels for learners and delivery for employers and providers, whilst protecting their quality.

However, aspects of T Levels may need further attention. The most significant challenge highlighted during the Review was the content, volume, and complexity of assessment. Providers reported challenges about the volume of assessment required, particularly as more T Levels are being offered and the number of learners taking them increases. This is especially acute in assessing the occupational specialism component. The Review was encouraged to hear about the recently announced changes to content and the volume of assessment in the Digital, Health and Science, and Education and Childcare T Levels.[428] The Government should continue to review and amend assessment practice across all T Level routes.

We heard substantial positive evidence about industry placements, from both learners and employers. As numbers have grown, it is encouraging to see a steady proportion of industry placement completions each year. However, providers raised concerns about sourcing the necessary volume and quality to support scaled-up provision. The Association of Colleges noted that providers report restricting the number of students

[426] DfE (2025) - 'Entries and Results - A level and AS by subject and student characteristics (single academic year)' from 'A level and other 16-18 results',
[427] DfE (2025) - Participation in education, training and employment age 16-18, Calendar year 2024
[428] GOV.UK (2025) - T Level update March 2025 – T Levels support for schools and colleges

that they can admit onto T Level programmes because of the challenges in finding more industry placements.[429] Additionally, we heard from employers that they feel hampered to engage by bureaucracy and lack of information and would value additional support in these matters. The Review was encouraged to see the tangible steps that the DfE has taken to improve industry placements, such as introducing more flexible delivery approaches and re-introducing financial support for employers offering placements.[430] However, additional employer engagement and sector support will be needed to ensure that the distinctive nature and benefits of industry placements remain as T Levels grow.

The Review wants to avoid a situation where, to facilitate the scaling-up of provision, providers are either forced to source lower-quality placements or the Government is obliged to introduce policy changes to industry placements, thus diluting the offer. The Review also heard broader calls from providers who want more opportunities for all learners to have experience with employers, including those not studying a T Level. To deliver this, additional engagement to support the full 16-19 sector will be needed.

T Levels were initially designed to facilitate direct routes to industry and further technical study. We were encouraged to see that many HE institutions now accept T Level learners onto programmes, but we also heard confusion about which universities accept T Levels and for which courses. Given that a significant proportion of T Level learners wish to use these qualifications to access university, it is important to make sure high-quality Information, Advice and Guidance is available about the qualification routes available to learners, and which are most suitable for their desired pathways. The Government should continue to promote awareness and understanding of T Levels to the HE sector.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Continues to work closely with awarding organisations to reduce the assessment burden of T Levels in the context of scale up.
- Increases its work with Skills England to support and drive forward employers' engagement with 16-19 education, particularly from employers involved in designing T Levels, with a view to increasing the number of industry placement and work encounter opportunities for learners.
- Considers, in relation to the above, a robust and creative approach to incentivising employers and linking employers more closely into the skills system.

[429] Association of Colleges (2024) - Submissions
[430] DfE (2025) - T Level industry placements delivery guidance - GOV.UK; National Council for Further Education (2025) - New T Level industry placement delivery approaches

- Continues work with providers and HE to ensure that young people are advised well on the implications of study choices for their futures and to promote understanding of T Levels by HE providers.
- Ensures that the content for T Levels remains up to date and that the amount of content can be delivered within the time available, and that it should seek opportunities to review and reduce content where necessary.

## Level 2

Around 1 in 5 learners aged 16 studies at level 2.[431] Level 2 qualifications provide an important pathway into many level 2 occupations and support progression to study at level 3 and above.

The 16 to 19-year-old learners studying at level 2 have different characteristics from their level 3 peers and are more likely to face additional barriers:

- 28% of level 2 learners have SEN (compared with 8% of level 3 learners).
- 26% of level 2 learners are eligible for free school meals (compared with 11% of level 3 learners).[432]

In addition to the qualifications they are studying for, level 2 learners are required to continue studying Maths and/or English if they have not reached grade 4 at GCSE by the end of Key Stage 4. Just 10% of 16-year-olds at level 2 achieved grade 4 in these subjects at GCSE, compared to 83% of level 3 learners. This reflects the fact that providers commonly set GCSE grade 4 in Maths and English as an entry requirement for many level 3 programmes.

Given the diverse needs and aspirations of the cohort, including the need for continued study of Maths and English, it is important that level 2 pathways are tailored to individual learners' progression aims. High-quality qualifications with a clear purpose are a vital element of level 2 study programmes, providing the foundation for progression and helping to engage and motivate learners in their desired subject or vocational area.

Most, but not all, 16-year-old learners studying at level 2 progress to level 3. In 2022/23, 63% of 16-year-olds with level 2 core aims progressed to a level 3 qualification or apprenticeship by age 18.[433] Currently, level 2 pathways must therefore be flexible enough to support both learners who want to progress to level 3 study and those who want to progress to a level 2 occupation.

[431] DfE (2025) - 'Participation Institutions and Qualifications' from 'Participation in education, training and employment age 16-18', Permanent data table
[432] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Analytical annex)
[433] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)

However, providers report that many level 2 qualifications are designed to serve multiple purposes and therefore lack a clear overall focus. This can mean that learners and their parents and carers find it difficult to understand which courses are most appropriate. For learners intending to progress to employment or apprenticeships from level 2 study, the Review heard concerns that current pathways do not always provide high-quality preparation. This creates challenges for providers in offering clear Information, Advice and Guidance, yet this is needed to help learners navigate through possible progression opportunities in the sectors they are considering studying for.

Current provision may also not support learners sufficiently who want to progress to level 3 programmes. Providers told us that they often design their own level 2 to level 3 programmes. These are not standardised and, anecdotally, we understand that progression to level 3 varies. The T Level Foundation Year (TLFY) is marketed as a programme to prepare learners to progress to T Levels, yet just 8% of those who complete the programme actually progress to a T Level.[434] We understand that the TLFY is often used to build broader skills and confidence for a wider cohort of learners, and it has therefore been more effective in enabling more generalised progression. For instance, progression from the TLFY to level 3 is 51%. But nevertheless, this indicates that almost half the learners taking it do not progress to level 3.[435]

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Introduces two separate pathways at level 2 (an occupational pathway and a pathway to level 3), each serving different purposes and designed specifically to meet these purposes and improve learner outcomes. These should be focused and ambitious pathways to ensure that all level 2 offers are valuable and high quality.
- Whilst a new pathway to level 3 is being developed, we recommend that the TLFY is strengthened by:
    - Exploring whether all learners should be expected to take an existing qualification as part of the TLFY.
    - Renaming the TLFY as soon as possible to make clear that the programme supports progression to broader level 3 pathways and not only to T Levels.

[434] UK Parliament (2025) - Introducing T Levels
[435] DfE (2024) - T Level action plan; Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex)

The two pathways the Review recommends are:

- An '**occupational pathway**' which should serve learners who want to move **directly into employment**, including apprenticeships, rather than progressing to higher level study. They should still be able to progress, however, to continued study at level 3 if that is the right option.
- A '**pathway to level 3**' which should serve learners who want to progress onto **continued study at level 3** because they are aiming to enter a level 3 occupation, higher education or an apprenticeship. It should therefore support progression to all level 3 options (academic, technical and vocational). It should strengthen and build on aspects of good practice from the TLFY and the Academic Progression Programme pilot, and other good practice examples.

Providing good Information, Advice and Guidance and diagnostic activities at the start of the programme should ensure that learners are enrolled on the right level 2 pathway to meet their needs. For learners with SEND and other barriers, this may be additional support to the offer available for all learners. These pathways must be deliverable for providers; therefore, there may be aspects across both programmes that can be combined as part of a flexible approach. We also expect that learners would be able to move between the two pathways where needed.

## Occupational pathway

### Purpose

- This pathway should prepare learners for level 2 occupations, including progression to level 3 apprenticeships, where appropriate, and should be designed with this in mind. The Government should consider opportunities to develop it from sector-based content drawn from occupational standards and ensure that broad introductory content is a key feature. It should align qualifications to occupational standards, so they provide the necessary technical content.

### Design

- This pathway should be a two-year pathway to give sufficient opportunity for the content to align with occupational standards and, where needed, with any specific requirements for a 'licence to practise' to allow smooth entry to work. We anticipate that some learners may leave the programme after one year to progress to an apprenticeship or other work-based training, to move from this pathway to the 'pathway to level 3', or to enter level 3 study directly. Learners with SEND or other barriers to learning may need to take the programme over a longer period of time and the DfE should explore with providers how this could be delivered.

- The core occupational pathway should be delivered in addition to other elements of the study programme, ensuring eligible learners can continue to study Maths and/or English qualifications as needed, but also opportunities for pastoral and life skills support. The pathway should include content tailored to prepare learners specifically for employment, balancing each learner's prior attainment and career aspirations, and include employer encounters so that they engage with them directly.

## Assessment and grading

- In designing the qualification element of the pathway, the DfE should work with awarding organisations so that assessment of the occupational components is deliverable and the assessment burden is not unmanageable for providers.
- Lastly, the DfE should explore grading all qualifications in this pathway with a recognisable structure and making sure that grading language is consistent. This is important to allow comparison and evaluation so that learners and employers can identify qualification grades.

## Pathway to level 3

## Purpose

- This pathway should prepare learners for progression onto level 3 pathways and should support learners who are sure of their desired progression direction, but also those who have some idea of the subjects or sector area into which they intend to progress at level 3 but may be unclear about whether they want to study an academic, technical or vocational pathway at level 3.

## Design

- This pathway should be a one-year study programme. However, as with the occupational pathway, learners with SEND or other barriers to learning may need to take the programme over a longer period of time.
- This pathway should have a strong focus on preparation for level 3. It should develop the learners' capabilities and transferable skills, provide exposure to level 3 study and build confidence and resilience so that learners are ready to take the step to level 3. It should include academic study and academic study skills, as well as a strong focus on Maths and English so learners are supported achieve the grades to access their level 3 option.
- A relevant subject-specific qualification should be included to develop foundational knowledge and skills for level 3 study, be broad enough not to narrow options and allow learners to evaluate their interest and aptitude in the subject(s) they want to study at level 3.

### Assessment and grading

- The pathway to level 3 qualification should be graded with a single, recognisable structure. This is important to allow relative comparison and evaluation and to ensure that qualification grades can be clearly identified by learners and employers.

## Level 1 and entry level

A relatively small proportion of the overall 16-year-old cohort studies at level 1 (3%) and entry level (1%), but it is a highly diverse cohort. Learners have a wide range of needs, aims and motivations.[436] Learners with identified SEND or those eligible for free school meals are over-represented and only around 9% of the cohort at level 1 and entry level have achieved both GCSE Maths and English by age 16.[437] Learners studying at level 1 and entry level are also much less likely to be in sustained employment or education after 16-19 study compared with their peers who study at higher levels.[438]

In planning study programmes at level 1 and entry level, providers are encouraged to identify learners' needs and progression ambitions to plan provision and appropriate support. Providers told us that level 1 and entry level study programmes are most effective when they are tailored to the needs of individual learners, giving them the opportunity to engage in their learning and make progress.

Qualifications at level 1 and entry level serve a wide range of purposes, including:

- Qualifications delivering vocationally related or pre-technical skills
- Functional Skills qualifications (FSQs) supporting learners to develop literacy, numeracy and digital skills
- Personal, Social and Employability (PSE) qualifications, to support self-development and preparation for work or independent living
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

The Review has not identified specific issues with the range of provision at level 1 and entry level, but we heard through the Call for Evidence and our engagement with 16-19 providers that there is no 'one size fits all' at level 1 and entry level. The range of purposes of study and needs of the cohort require a more nuanced approach.

We are not making specific recommendations about level 1 and entry level, but we encourage the Government to ensure progression pathways through these levels are clear and coherent, including alignment with the recommendations for level 2 pathways

[436] DfE (2025) - Participation in education, training and employment age 16-18, Calendar year 2024
[437] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (Analytical annex); Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Analytical annex)
[438] DfE (2025) - 16-18 destination measures, Academic year 2023/24

outlined above. We are particularly mindful of the needs of learners who may not be progressing to higher levels of study, including learners working to build core personal, social and employability skills to support success in employment and independent living. We encourage the Government to ensure PSE qualifications are high quality and lead to positive outcomes, supporting learners to engage in their education and make progress as they prepare for life and work.

## 16-19 Maths and English

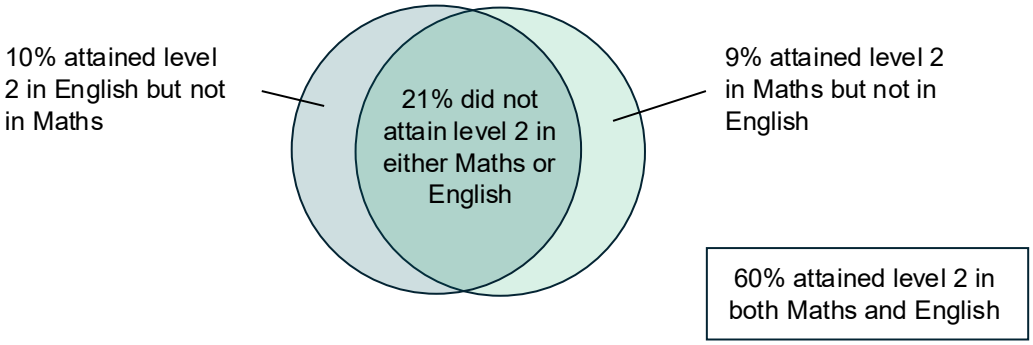
Higher levels of attainment in Maths and English are strongly linked to positive social and economic outcomes, including higher earnings, better employment opportunities, improved health and life satisfaction and greater civic engagement and trust.[439]

Achieving level 2 in Maths and English (equivalent to a grade 4 or above in GCSE Maths and GCSE English) is particularly important since it is commonly used as an entry requirement for many jobs and for progression to level 3 qualifications. This is reflected in the data: learners who achieve level 2 in Maths and English at Key Stage 4 are more likely to progress to a sustained education, apprenticeship or employment destination after 16-19 study (85%) than those who do not (63%).[440] However, with the exception of years where grades were affected by COVID-19 related adjustments, around 40% of learners each year finish Key Stage 4 without achieving level 2 in both Maths and English.[441]

For the 2018/19 cohort (the latest cohort of learners whose Key Stage 4 and 16-19 qualification grading were not affected by COVID-19 adjustments), 9% achieved level 2 in Maths but not English, 10% in English but not Maths and 21% did not achieve level 2 in either, as Figure 9 shows.

[439] DfE (2021) - GCSE attainment and lifetime earnings; OECD (2024) - Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World?; Kerr, M. (2021), Paying the price: The cost of very poor adult literacy; Parsons, S. & Bynner, J. (2005) - Does Numeracy Matter More; Gutierrez, O., Vignoles, A. & de Coulon, A. (2007) - The Value of Basic Skills in the British Labour Market
[440] DfE (2025) - 16-18 destination measures, academic year 2023/24
[441] DfE (2025) - 'Attainment by characteristics - ages 16-25'

**Figure 9. Attainment of level 2 Maths and English by age 16 for the 2018/19 cohort[442]**




This highlights the continuing challenges schools face in supporting students to reach the expected standard in Maths and English by age 16, and it is important that we do not view this solely as a 16-19 problem, since 80% of learners with low prior attainment at Key Stage 2 do not reach level 2 in Maths and English by age 16.[443] The Review has identified several specific issues in relation to the curriculum and assessment for Maths and English from Key Stages 1 to 4 and recommends changes (see curriculum recommendations by subject). In addition, it is important to recognise that demographic change in the population and the effects of lost learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on younger cohorts mean that the scale and complexity of the challenge in supporting learners to reach level 2 in Maths and English is likely to grow in the future.[444]

Learners who do not reach level 2 by the age of 16 are required to continue to study towards level 2 by the end of 16-19 study, a condition of funding, introduced by the DfE from 2014/15 onwards. The majority (71%) of these 16-19 learners are enrolled on GCSEs in Maths and English Language. A smaller proportion (22%) are entered for Functional Skills qualifications; 6% study other courses.[445]

However, of the 2018/19 cohort who continued to study under the condition of funding policy, 71% did not reach level 2 in Maths and English by age 19.[446] There are differences between the subjects: a third (34%) of those studying English reached level 2 by age 19 and only a quarter (25%) studying Maths.[447] Of most concern, however, is that a large proportion of learners made no grade progress at all. For example, in 2018/19, 62% did not improve in English and 64% in Maths.[448]

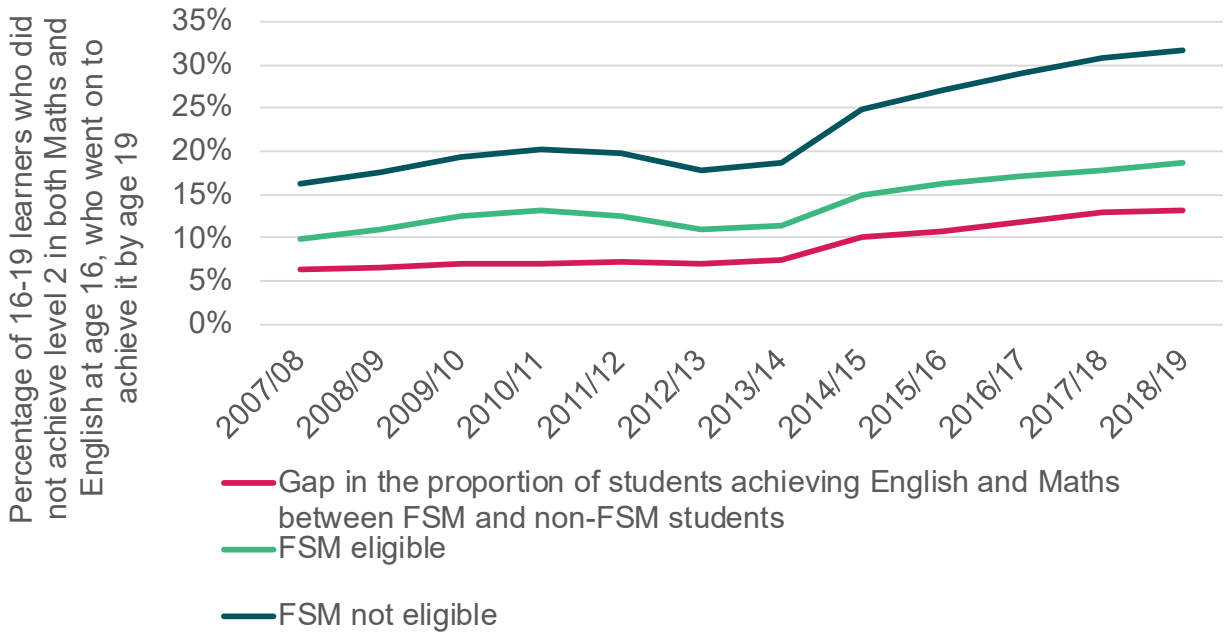
[442] DfE (2025) - Attainment in level 2 English and Maths by age 16, figures may not sum due to rounding.
[443] DfE (2025) - 'Key Stage 2 to 4 transition matrices KS4 measures' from 'Key Stage 4 performance'
[444] EEF (2022) - Best evidence on impact of COVID-19 on pupil attainment; DfE (2025) - Participation in education, training and employment age 16-18, Calendar year 2024
[445] DfE (2025) - 'English and Maths - below level 3 entries by student characteristics' from 'A level and other 16-18 results'
[446] The latest cohort of learners whose Key Stage 4 and 16–19 qualification grading were not affected by COVID-19 adjustments.
[447] DfE (2025) - Attainment by characteristics - ages 16-25
[448] DfE (2025) - English and maths progress

The characteristics of these learners also show significant differences. Of the 2018/19 cohort:

- 20% of learners who were from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds went on to achieve level 2 by age 19, compared with 35% of learners who were not.
- 15% of learners with SEN went on to achieve level 2 by age 19 compared with 34% of learners with no identified SEN.[449]

Figure 10 below shows that the proportion of learners who had not achieved level 2 in Maths and/or English age 16 but went on to achieve level 2 in both by age 19 had been steadily improving between 2012/13 and 2018/19. The improvement has been greater for learners who are not eligible for free school meals (FSM) than for learners who were eligible.[450]

**Figure 10. Percentage of 16-19 learners who did not achieve level 2 in Maths and English by age 16 who achieved it by age 19, by free school meal status**[451]




Learners who achieved a grade 3 at Key Stage 4 are much more likely to achieve level 2 by the end of 16-19 study than those who achieved grades 1 or 2. Nearly half of learners who achieved a grade 3 at Key Stage 4 went on to achieve level 2 by the end of 16-19 study (48% for English and 44% for Maths) (Figure 10). This more positive outcome

[449] DfE (2025) - Attainment by characteristics - ages 16-25
[450] DfE (2025) - Attainment by characteristics
[451] DfE (2025) - Attainment by characteristics; DfE (2025) - English and Maths level 2 attainment by age 19 given lack of attainment at age 16 FSM gap

suggests that continuing with GCSEs can be effective for some learners in achieving level 2.

However, for learners with lower prior attainment (below a GCSE grade 3), the proportion reaching level 2 during 16-19 is substantially lower. Only 21% of those with a grade 2 in English and 13% with a grade 2 in Maths by age 16 achieved level 2 by age 19; for those with a grade 1, the figures drop to around 5% for both subjects. Some learners who do not achieve level 2 still make grade progress, but many do not.[452]

We have heard consistently from teachers and other experts that learners with the lowest GCSE attainment (particularly grades 1 or 2) have fundamental knowledge gaps that extend to earlier key stages. As these learners have progressed through school, these gaps have been compounded, leading to cumulative disfluency. This makes it increasingly difficult for them to engage with the curriculum and leaves them underprepared for the demands of study at GCSE level. As they enter further education, they are typically re-enrolled onto GCSE courses, with additional teaching time and support for Maths and English. Providers' success rates vary, and the quality of teaching and teaching time are important factors. However, it is also clear that part of the reason why many of them struggle to make progress is that the approach required to teach the GCSE curriculum in the time available does not allow sufficient opportunity to revisit and deal with their more fundamental gaps in knowledge.

As an alternative to GCSEs, providers can choose to provide FSQs in Maths and English at level 2, level 1 and entry levels 3, 2 and 1. These are applied qualifications, designed to support learners in developing their practical skills in literacy, numeracy and IT so that they can move on to further technical education, progress into employment or develop life skills. They are widely used in adult education and assess learners' ability to apply knowledge and skills in different real-world contexts relevant to the workplace. They are approximately half the size of a GCSE and are assessed on a pass-fail basis.[453]

Through our engagement work with further education teachers and leaders, we heard some positive uses of FSQs to help re-engage learners with studying Maths and English. FSQs have a different focus to GCSEs offering learners a fresh start, with the opportunity to take assessment in-year on demand and thereby make progress. However, although this may serve some learners well, we heard overwhelmingly from providers that, for the majority of learners, FSQs do not currently serve as an appropriate pathway for them to reach level 2. This is reflected in the data, which show that take-up of FSQs remains very low in comparison to GCSEs at 16-19 (22% of 16 to 19-year-olds take FSQs across level 2, level 1 and entry level compared to 71% taking GCSEs). Providers gave a range of reasons for this, including:

[452] DfE (2025) - English and maths progress
[453] Ofqual (2022) - Functional Skills qualifications: requirements and guidance; Ofqual (2015) Improving functional skills qualifications

- **Content:** The contextualisation of content to real-world and workplace scenarios is better suited to adult learners who have more experience of life and employment. Learners at 16-19, however, are faced with the added cognitive load involved in carrying out and applying mathematical calculations to a workplace scenario with which they are unfamiliar.
- **Grading:** The FSQ pass-fail grading system creates high-stakes pressure for the learner and for providers, with no option to recognise partial progress. Learners who narrowly miss the pass mark may complete a year of study with no formal recognition, contributing further to a lack of motivation and engagement.
- **Recognition**: FSQs are typically less well-understood and less widely recognised by parents and carers, employers and HE providers than GCSEs and therefore have less currency as a qualification. When surveyed, 44% of employers reported having limited or not very good understanding of FSQs; 28% said they had no understanding at all.[454]

As noted above, providers' success rates vary in supporting 16-19 learners to make progress and to reach level 2 in Maths and English. Our engagement with providers and experts suggests that, whilst there are many variables, providers with strong Maths and English outcomes typically prioritise these subjects strategically across the institution. For example, this can include joined up approaches to knowledge sharing and staff networks that help to foster a sense of a collective organisational responsibility for Maths and English results.[455]

However, providers also reported that certain aspects of performance and accountability arrangements may be inadvertently contributing to the practice and culture of repeated resits, including pressure to enter learners for exams prematurely. For example, we heard that the main driver of annual exam entry is the structure of one-year study programmes. This creates pressure to record achievement within that timeframe, especially when it is uncertain whether learners will return the following year. As our Interim Report highlighted, evidence presented by Ofqual shows that entering learners into exams prematurely is rarely successful. Of the 3,400 17-year-olds with grade 2 in GCSE Maths from June 2024 who were re-entered by their provider in November 2024, only around 50 of them achieved a grade 4; the vast majority achieved another grade 2.[456]

## A more nuanced approach to Maths and English at 16-19

We have heard evidence from a wide range of stakeholders about the need for a different and more nuanced approach to supporting learners to engage with and make progress in Maths and English, particularly those with lower prior attainment in the form of a grade 1 or 2 at GCSE.

[454] Ofqual (2023) - Perceptions of Vocational and Technical Qualifications in England - wave 6
[455] EPI (2025) - English and Maths Resits: Drivers of Success
[456] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report (Analytical annex)

Some stakeholders have called for the present expectation for continued study of Maths and English to be removed because of the detrimental impact of resits on morale. However, we consider that the importance for life chances of securing Maths and English means that it should remain. The urgent challenge is to improve efficacy so that more young people are supported to make progress and fewer of them reach 16-19 study without having secured level 2 (see curriculum recommendations by subject).

As many stakeholders have emphasised, we think a key priority should be to ensure that learners are supported to master the fundamentals, tacking earlier gaps so that they gain a sufficient level of proficiency to progress to higher levels of study or employment. We are also attuned to calls for more modular and flexible assessment that recognises what learners can do and not what they cannot.

In line with current practice, we think that all learners who do not reach level 2 by the end of Key Stage 4, regardless of the grade they achieved, should have the option to resit the GCSE. We particularly think the expectation should remain that learners with a grade 3, who may have narrowly missed out on a grade 4, should study towards the GCSE. However, there is a strong case for an alternative option at 16-19 for those with a GCSE grade 2 or below to support study towards and achievement of level 2.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Strengthens the accountability system and explores opportunities to incentivise effective practice across 16-19 providers.
- Introduces new level 1 stepped qualifications for Maths and English Language at 16-19, to enable learners to make progress towards achieving level 2 in these GCSEs during 16-19 study. The Review Panel recommends these qualifications are:
    - One-year, level 1 qualifications for 16 to 19-year-olds with prior attainment of a grade 1 or 2 at GCSE.
    - Designed to focus teaching on mastery of the fundamentals, addressing knowledge gaps from earlier key stages in steps and enabling learners to build confidence in all areas of the GCSE up to the equivalent of grade 3.
    - Assessed in a modular way to allow learners to build up and ‘bank’ their progress, giving accreditation for modules learners have passed.
    - Graded to the equivalent of a strong GCSE grade 3, thereby putting learners who have achieved this level 1 qualification in a strong position to resit the GCSE the following year and achieve level 2 during 16-19 study.

The Review Panel recommends that the Government strengthens the accountability system to incentivise positive behaviours and the spreading of best practice. In particular, the Government should explore changes to encourage a greater recognition of the progress learners make, including ways to recognise progress below a grade 4, and to ensure learners are given sufficient time to consolidate knowledge before being entered for exams, with greater clarification of expectations around who should be entered for resits.

The Government should do this in close collaboration with the sector, exploring opportunities to encourage more dynamic and visible spreading of best practice in progressing learners with lower prior attainment.

We recommend that the Government introduces new, one-year, stepped qualifications at level 1 for Maths and English Language at 16-19. This qualification should focus teaching on mastery of the fundamentals, addressing knowledge gaps from earlier key stages and enabling learners to build confidence in areas of the GCSE up to and including the equivalent of a strong grade 3. This would give learners a strong foundation for success in resitting the full GCSE and achieving level 2 during 16-19 study.

A second key purpose of this new qualification would be to better engage and motivate learners. We recommend that the Government and Ofqual consider how these qualifications can be assessed in a modular ('stepped') way that enables learners to build up and 'bank' progress over time and to receive accreditation for the modules they have passed. For many learners, this may be the first time they achieve something tangible in Maths and English. This approach would shift the focus from failure to progress, helping to build confidence and momentum.

These qualifications should be targeted towards learners with prior attainment of a grade 2 or below at GCSE. The current expectation should remain that learners with a grade 3 continue to study towards reaching level 2 by retaking the GCSE.

## Non-qualification activity within 16-19 study programmes

As part of their study programme, all 16 to 19-year-old learners are expected to undertake meaningful non-qualification activity to complement their substantive qualifications, Maths and English (where required) and work experience. The DfE's guidance for 16-19 study programmes says that non-qualification activity should be designed 'to develop students' character, broader skills, attitudes and confidence and support progression'.[457]

It is vital that all young people are supported to leave education well prepared for life and work. However, stakeholders have told us that, too often, young people are leaving

[457] DfE (2025) - 16–19 study programmes guidance: 2025/26 academic year

education lacking critical skills in oracy and other transferable skills, applied knowledge such as digital, media and financial literacy, and knowledge needed for citizenship such as understanding political and democratic processes (see Preparing learners for a changing world).

We heard about the wide range of enrichment, employment and pastoral activities provided by schools and colleges as part of the non-qualification element of study programmes. This included group work, student-led social action projects and campaigns, one-to-one support and tutoring, peer mentoring, life skills sessions and activities promoting physical and mental health and wellbeing. They also included volunteering and community activities, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. These activities serve multiple purposes, including complementing learners' substantive qualifications, developing study and employability skills, and developing learners' social and cultural capital.[458]

The broad range of activities partly reflects national variations in learners' needs, as well as individual providers' resources, capacities, and local contexts. The DfE's expectations in its guidance are deliberately broad, allowing for a range of interpretation. However, we have heard from providers that, whilst a degree of flexibility is beneficial to accommodate local contexts, the current level of ambiguity is unhelpful. A lack of clarity has led to significant variation in interpretation and implementation of the guidance, with inconsistency in the types of activities and variation in the quality of students' experiences.

Through our engagement, we heard calls for clearer guidance to promote more effective practice in delivering high-quality enrichment, employment, and pastoral support. We heard many examples of best practice that should be encouraged, including:

- Continuing assessment and monitoring throughout 16-19 education, giving learners a clear record of what they have achieved and helping them to identify and tackle gaps in their knowledge and skills to support their aspirations for study and progression.
- Strong relationships and information-sharing between schools and 16-19 providers so that the latter have a good understanding of learners' social and personal development needs and can plan accordingly to adjust support.
- Whole organisation prioritising of enrichment, employment and pastoral activities, with clear support and messaging from senior leadership teams and a focus on where key skills are embedded in learners' study programmes.

[458] Association of Colleges (2023) - The Valuing Enrichment Project

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Strengthens guidance for 16-19 study programmes to promote effective practice in delivering non-qualification activity and to clarify expectations about the types of activities that should be core to the enrichment offer. The focus should be on applied knowledge and transferable skills that will enable learners to step confidently into adulthood.
- Considers whether certain elements of non-qualification activity should be made mandatory so that learners' access to opportunities is more consistent.

# Future curriculum reviews

Our Terms of Reference invite us to make recommendations about how future updates to the curriculum and assessment system should be approached.[459] This is the fifth review of the national curriculum since it was introduced into schools in 1989. These reviews have all differed significantly in terms of their methodology and scope. The time between reviews has also varied considerably, ranging from two years to over a decade.

In formulating our approach, and in order to make evidence-based recommendations for how future curriculum reviews should be conducted, we have taken input from experts and drawn on research and international analysis. It should be acknowledged that this is an area in which evidence is notably underdeveloped, with research largely limited to comparative work with other international jurisdictions; and even this tends to be somewhat superficial and selective in scope. Due to the very different socio-political contexts of different countries and the ways in which these contribute to differing education system arrangements and features,[460] international evidence on curriculum arrangements must be treated as an informative aide for comparative reflection on our own system, rather than a direct source of transferable policies.[461] Nevertheless, our recommendations reflect our appraisal of the evidence available.

The approaches taken to curriculum reform in other nations - including among high-performing jurisdictions - vary widely. Some undergo curriculum reform on a planned cyclical basis, while others do not.[462] And while arrangements and Reviews are precipitated by Governments, there is also wide variation in the governance arrangements for curriculum reform.[463]

National curriculum content must be kept up to date, fit for purpose and reflective of the needs of wider society. Periodic holistic reviews of the national curriculum are therefore essential for ensuring these aims are achieved, as well as for maintaining overall curriculum coherence. Reviews are also a valuable mechanism for addressing curriculum shape in the round. Reviews can evaluate whether the breadth and depth of different subjects and their content remains appropriate, as well as determining the overarching aims of schooling and the time needed for the different activities required to meet these aims. Reviews can also address the build-up of content in particular areas to ensure that the curriculum remains deliverable for teachers and ambitious for students.

[459] Curriculum and Assessment Review: Set-up
[460] Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2023) - How Political Contexts Influence Education Systems: Patterns, Constraints, Entry Points
[461] Deng, Z. & Gopinathan, S. (2016) - PISA and high-performing education systems: explaining Singapore's education success
[462] EPI (2021) - How leading education nations develop and reform their curriculum systems
[463] OECD (2020) - Curriculum reform

If reviews are not holistic (that is, if they review and update individual subjects or key stages in silos), a potential negative consequence can be the introduction of significant volumes of additional content without due regard to the wider shape or deliverability of the curriculum as a whole. If new content is added to the national curriculum but some existing content is not removed, this inevitably puts pressure on already tight teaching time. There are always compelling arguments for new content to be added to the curriculum, but the fact that teaching time is limited means that decisions must be made about what content to prioritise. Holistic reviews are well suited to ensuring that a balance is struck between the volume of content and the time to teach it.

The timing of holistic reviews also requires careful consideration. If reviews are undertaken too frequently, this can have a disruptive impact on the education sector, which must constantly adapt to the new direction and requirements of a changed curriculum.[464] However, if reviews are too infrequent, the curriculum and assessment system risks becoming dated and unfit for purpose. We recommend that holistic reviews should be undertaken at 10-year intervals, in keeping with the (limited) international evidence.[465] This allows time for the changes that follow each review to 'bed-in' and ensures that the whole sector benefits from stability.[466]

However, we live in a rapidly changing world where significant social, technological and environmental changes are presenting young people with both opportunities and challenges. Some areas of the curriculum therefore may need more regular updates than others,[467] and this is particularly the case for disciplines affected by rapidly evolving digital technologies. In such areas, there are benefits in not leaving any necessary amendments until the next holistic review (which could be up to a decade away). In addition to holistic reviews, we therefore recommend a rolling programme of light-touch minimalist updates of different elements of the national curriculum and its Programmes of Study, conducted by the DfE with support from relevant agencies. These should have a threefold aim of ensuring that the national curriculum remains up to date, addressing any specific issues that arise, and ensuring that the volume of content remains appropriate and deliverable. These light-touch reviews should avoid adding content wherever possible and, instead, focus on refreshing any that is outdated.[468]

Given the different international approaches to curriculum reviews and the diverse approaches that have been adopted in England, there are several models which future holistic reviews might adopt.[469] Future reviews should set clear aims and principles at the outset, with public consultation then focused on how to achieve those aims. An evidence-led approach is crucial and should use a variety of different types of evidence, such as

[464] OECD (2020) - Curriculum Overload; Edpol (2020) - Curriculum roundtable: Change process blueprint
[465] OECD (2020) - Curriculum reform; Edpol (2020) - Curriculum roundtable: Change process blueprint
[466] Edpol (2020) - Curriculum roundtable: Change process blueprint
[467] Education Select Committee (2025) - 6 May 2025 - Curriculum and Assessment Review - Oral evidence
[468] Edpol (2020) - Curriculum roundtable: Change process blueprint
[469] EPI (2021) - How leading education nations develop and reform their curriculum systems

robust longitudinal data, public consultation, and engagement with the sector. A suitable balance between external expert input and central coordination is also necessary. This is to avoid the risks of large committees neutralising the efficacy of proposals through consensus-seeking rather than using evidence to steer recommendations, or alternatively recommending additional content without due regard to successful implementation (or the impact on time available for other subject areas).

The impact of reforms should always be carefully evaluated, including those that follow this Review. It is also essential that future reviews pay due attention to the capacity and workload of professionals and educational institutions, with piloting used where feasible to inform plans for significant change. This report sets out separately our principles for reviewing and refreshing the curriculum Programmes of Study effectively (see curriculum principles), which we recommend to future reviews as a means of effectively reforming the national curriculum.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Limits the intervals between holistic curriculum reviews to approximately a decade.
- Supplements holistic reviews with a rolling programme of light-touch minimalist updates (conducted by the DfE with support from its agencies) of the national curriculum and its Programmes of Study, with a threefold aim of:
    - Ensuring the national curriculum remains up to date;[470]
    - Addressing any specific issues arising; and
    - Ensuring that the volume of content remains appropriate and deliverable.
- Ensures that future reviews set clear objectives at the outset, adopt a rigorous evidence-led approach and undertake public consultation. The Government should also ensure that future reviews strike an appropriate balance between external expert input and central coordination and that it evaluates the likely impact of any proposed changes, including considering the capacity and workload of professionals and educational institutions.

[470] Including addressing ongoing changes in content and role of digital technology.

## Next steps and implementation of the Review's recommendations

The publication of this report marks the start of the next phase of work to ensure findings are translated into meaningful change across a range of short, medium and longer term priorities. It will be the Government's responsibility, alongside key stakeholders, to engage with our recommendations and ensure they are implemented across the system. This process will begin with the Government's formal response to the Reviews findings and recommendations, which is due to be published alongside this report.

In addition, work will continue to identify and engage experienced drafters to enact the changes we have outlined to the Programmes of Study and subject content for each of the individual subjects. This process will be led by the Government and take place from late 2025 onwards. Throughout this process, there will be opportunities for draft content to be tested with stakeholders through the statutory consultation process in 2026, to ensure it balances delivery of the Review's recommendations with offering the right level of depth and breadth.

The Government should monitor the impact of these reforms, and trends in participation, attainment, engagement and progress. This is especially important where we have identified disparities related to particular groups of children and young people. There is a clear need to ensure that such gaps narrow, and to secure high standards for all.

# Conclusion

The Review has highlighted many strengths in our curriculum and assessment system that are made possible by the dedication and expertise of those who work in education. Much of the existing framework is effective and should therefore remain in place. However, our work has identified clear areas where improvement is needed.

Robust and diverse evidence underpins our recommendations. This evidence, which has been drawn from system data, responses to our Call for Evidence, polling, expert consultation, academic research and international comparisons, has been invaluable in guiding the Review's evaluation of options and our consideration of risk and reward.

This report sets out an ambitious but achievable set of recommendations. We urge the Government to take a careful, staged approach to implementation that takes into account the wider context in the education system, and wider challenges currently facing the sector that fall outside the remit of this review.

We believe that our vision for a world-leading curriculum and assessment system in England, and the recommendations we set out to achieve it, have the potential to bring about important and lasting change that improves the educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people. We have sought to capitalise on what is working well in our system, and to address what is not, to ensure that more children and young people have access to a high-quality curriculum and assessment system and are supported to achieve and thrive.

Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to thank everybody who has engaged with the Review throughout this process and who will be involved in implementing the reforms that we recommend.

# Annex 1: Accountability measures in England's primary, secondary and 16-18 education system, 2024/25

**Figure 11. List of headline accountability measures in primary,[471] secondary[472] and 16-18 education[473] in England, academic year 2024/25**

| Performance measure and Description |
|---|
| **Primary** |
| Percentage of pupils achieving the 'expected standard' in English reading, English writing and Maths at the end of Key Stage 2 |
| Pupils' average scaled score in:<br>• English reading at the end of Key Stage 2<br>• Maths at the end of Key Stage 2 |
| Percentage of pupils who achieve at a higher standard[474] in English reading, English writing and Maths |
| Key Stage 1-2 progress measures * |
| **Secondary** |
| Attainment 8: measures students' attainment across eight qualifications including:<br>• Maths (double weighted) and English (double weighted, if both English Language and English Literature are sat)<br>• Three qualifications that count in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) measures<br>• Three further qualifications that can be GCSE qualifications (including EBacc subjects) or technical awards from the DfE approved list of qualifications |
| Progress 8 **: aims to capture the progress that students in a school make from the end of primary school to the end of Key Stage 4. It is a type of value-added measure, which means that students' results are compared to other students nationally with similar prior attainment |
| Attainment in English and Maths (Key Stage 4): these measures show the proportion of students achieving a grade 5 and above in GCSE English (either Literature or Language) and Maths (a headline measure) and the proportion of students achieving a grade 4 and above in these subjects |
| EBacc entry: reports the percentage of students entered for the EBacc. To enter the EBacc, students must take up to eight GCSEs across five subject 'pillars' shown by Figure 12. Structure of the EBacc |
| EBacc APS: Students' point scores across the five pillars of the EBacc: English, Maths, Science, Language and Humanities |

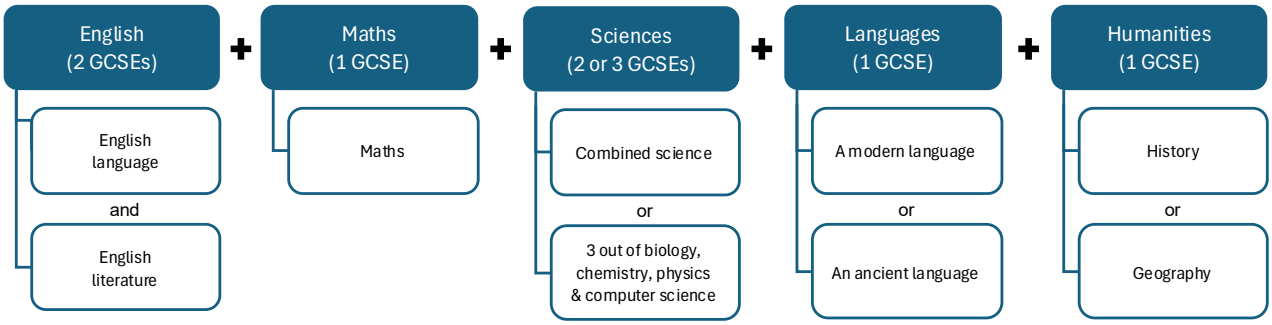
[471] DfE (2025) - Primary school accountability in 2025: technical guide
[472] DfE (2025) - Secondary accountability measures (including Progress 8 and Attainment 8)
[473] DfE (2025) - 16 to 18 accountability headline measures
[474] To be counted towards the measure, a pupil must have a 'high scaled score' of 110 or more in reading and maths; and have been teacher assessed in writing as 'working at greater depth'.

| |
|---|
| Pupil destinations: percentage of students continuing to a sustained education, employment, or training destination in the year after completing Key Stage 4 study (after Year 11) |
| **16-18** |
| 16-18 value added (progress) measures: these measures show how well students did in their qualifications compared to other students with similar prior attainment nationally |
| Attainment measures: the headline attainment measures show the average point score (APS) per entry, also expressed as an average grade |
| Retention measures: the headline retention measures show the percentage of students retained to the end of the core aim[475] of their study programme |
| Destination measures: the headline destination measure shows the percentage of students that progress to a sustained education, training or employment destination after 16-18 study |
| English and Maths progress measures ***: these measures showed, for students that did not achieve a grade 4 or above in GCSE English or Maths at Key Stage 4, how much progress learners make between their Key Stage 4 GCSE result and any re-takes they do in GCSE English or GCSE Maths or equivalent at 16-18 |

* Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 progress measure will not be published for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years as Key Stage 2 pupils in these years did not have Key Stage 1 assessments due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be possible to return to producing Key Stage 1-2 progress measures in 2025/26 and 2026/27. For the cohort reaching the end of Key Stage 2 in 2027/28, baseline data available to calculate progress will be from the Reception Baseline Assessment taken in 2021/22.
** As primary tests and assessments were cancelled in the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21 due to COVID-19 disruption, there will be no Key Stage 2 prior attainment data available to calculate Progress 8 when the relevant cohorts reach the end of Key Stage 4 in the academic years 2024/25 and 2025/26. For these years, the most recent available Progress 8 scores (2023/24 and 2022/23) will be provided.
*** The DfE will not produce and publish a 16-18 English and Maths progress measure for students completing 16-18 study in the 2023/24 academic year. The earliest point at which the DfE will return to producing the English and Maths progress measure is for the 2024/25 academic year.

[475] The core aim is the principal or 'core' activity in a student's programme. All 16–19 study programmes have a core aim. Core aims are tailored to the needs of the individual and typically includes a substantial qualification (academic or technical) or preparation for employment.

## Figure 12. Structure of the EBacc



# Annex 2: Stakeholder engagement

## Stakeholder engagement and consultation

The Review has been undertaken in close consultation with education professionals and other experts, parents and carers, children and young people, and stakeholders such as employers, universities, and trade unions. We are enormously grateful to all of those that have given their time to support and advise the Review. We wish to express our deepest thanks to everyone that engaged, including those that made time to respond to the Call for Evidence and those who attended the Review's public events.

### Regional public events

| Location | Date | Attendee Numbers for open public event |
|---|---|---|
| South West - Exeter | Monday 21 October 2024 | 97 |
| East of England - Cambridge | Wednesday 23 October 2024 | 114 |
| East Midlands - Northampton | Thursday 24 October 2024 | 122 |
| London | Monday 4 November 2024 | 150 |
| Online Webinar | Tuesday 5 November 2024 | 1250 |
| West Midlands - West Bromwich | Monday 11 November 2024 | 118 |
| South East - Folkestone | Tuesday 19 November 2024 | 148 |
| Yorkshire and Humber - Doncaster | Thursday 21 November 2024 | 106 |
| North East - Darlington | Tuesday 26 November 2024 | 200 |
| North West - Oldham | Wednesday 27 November 2024 | 150 |
| Online Webinar | Thursday 28 November 2024 | 1233 |
| Total | - | 3688 |

Each of these regional events also incorporated a school or College visit where the Review's Chair and Review team members held roundtables with groups of students and teachers to seek their views on a wide range of topics.

## Further school and college visits

Members of the Review Panel and/or the Review Chair met with students and teachers to discuss their views on the current curriculum and assessment mechanisms.

| School or College | Location | Date |
|---|---|---|
| Greenwood Academy | Birmingham | Wednesday 25 September 2024 |
| Exeter College | Exeter | Monday 21 October 2024 |
| Cambourne Village College | Cambridge | Wednesday 23 October 2024 |
| Matthew Arnold Academy | Northampton | Thursday 24 October 2024 |
| Westminster Kingsway College | London | Monday 4 November 2024 |
| Ormiston George Salter Academy | West Bromwich | Monday 11 November 2024 |
| Folkestone Academy | Folkestone | Tuesday 19 November 2024 |
| Doncaster College | Doncaster | Thursday 21 November 2024 |
| Wyvern Academy | Darlington | Tuesday 26 November 2024 |
| The Oldham Academy North | Oldham | Wednesday 27 November 2024 |
| Nottingham Girls Academy | Nottingham | Monday 9 December 2024 |
| Starbank School | Birmingham | Tuesday 18 March 2025 |
| Outwood Primary Academy Woodlands and Outwood Academy Danum | Doncaster | Tuesday 22 April 2025 |
| West Thames College | London | Thursday 1 May 2025 |
| London Design and Engineering UTC | London | Wednesday 21 May 2025 |

## Roundtables and oral evidence sessions

Members of the Review Panel sought views and evidence from particular stakeholder groups and/or explored topics and subjects via a series of evidence sessions and roundtables over the period of the Review.

### Roundtables

| Focus | Date |
|---|---|
| Children's Commissioner Youth Ambassador roundtable | Thursday 31 October 2024 |
| English and Maths Requirements 16-19 (Resits) | Tuesday 5 November 2024 |
| Awarding Organisations | Monday 18 November 2024 |
| Employer Representative Organisations | Wednesday 11 December 2024 |
| Religious Education | Monday 16 December 2024 |
| Roundtable with the Students Organising for Sustainability UK (SOS UK) 'The Youth Shadow Review Panel' attended by Expert panel members | Monday 16 December 2024 |
| Employers | Thursday 30 January 2025 |
| PE / Sports | Tuesday 4 February 2025 |
| Arts / Cultural industries | Tuesday 11 February 2025 |
| Subject Associations | Tuesday 1 July 2025 |
| Awarding Organisations | Wednesday 2 July 2025 |
| Arts Subjects | Tuesday 15 July 2025 |
| Employers | Tuesday 22 July 2025 |

**Oral evidence sessions**

| Focus | Date |
|---|---|
| SEND | Tuesday 3 December 2024 |
| Socio-economic disadvantage and intersectionality | Wednesday 4 December 2024 |

## Subject meetings

Expert subject specialists were also consulted as part of the Review's work focusing on curriculum subjects pre-16 during February to September 2025. These discussions included teachers, subject experts such as Subject Associations, other subject organisations and academic subject advisors and specialists. These discussions helped the Review Panel conduct further detailed analysis of the issues, enabling more specific analysis of to be considered, implications to be discussed and options and recommendations to be formulated and agreed.

## International engagement

The Review team spoke with devolved administrations and governments internationally to understand how their curricula operate, how they approached their reviews or reforms, to hear lessons learned and to access evidence.

| Government | Date |
|---|---|
| Scotland | Thursday 12 September 2024; Thursday 31 October 2024 |
| Netherlands | Thursday 19 September 2024 |
| France | Wednesday 22 January 2025 |
| Northern Ireland | Monday 10 February 2025; Tuesday 15 April 2025; Wednesday 16 July 2025 |
| Wales | Thursday 17 October 2024; Friday 18 July 2025 |
| Belgium | Wednesday 25 June 2025 |
| Ireland | Monday 30 June 2025 |
| Hong Kong | Thursday 28 August |
| Singapore | Friday 29 August |

## Wider stakeholder engagement and consultation

Aside from the activity mentioned above the Review Chair, members of the Review Panel and members of the Review team had meetings with many stakeholders - both individuals and organisations. These included meetings with key sector organisations and individuals, attendance at external events and conferences. The Review Chair and members of the Review Panel have also given conference presentations and addressed key sector events.

# Annex 3: List of all recommendations

## Overarching recommendations

### Towards a world leading curriculum

We recommend that the Government:

- Introduces an oracy framework to support practice and to complement the existing frameworks for Reading and Writing.

### Curriculum Principles recommendations

We recommend that the Government adopts the following curriculum principles when drafting Programmes of Study for the refreshed national curriculum.

- The refreshed national curriculum must be an aspirational, engaging and demanding offer that reflects the high expectations and excellence our young people deserve, irrespective of background.
- The refreshed national curriculum should retain a knowledge-rich approach, ensuring skills are developed in conjunction with knowledge in ways that are appropriate for each subject discipline.
- The national curriculum should be constructed so that it supports children and young people to master core concepts, ensuring sufficient space for them to build their knowledge and deepen their understanding.
- Curriculum coherence should be an organising principle for curriculum drafters and support the selection and prioritisation of content. Where appropriate, vertical core concepts on which subjects have been constructed should be clearly presented, and horizontal coherence should be ensured.
- Foundation subject content should specify the essential substantive knowledge and skills which should be taught to enable children and young people to meet expectations at the end of each key stage.
- The refreshed national curriculum should ensure the professional autonomy of teachers is maintained, making sure that greater specificity does not substantially restrict teachers' flexibility to choose lesson content and how to teach it.
- The national curriculum is for all our children and young people. As such, it should reflect our diverse society and the contributions of people of all backgrounds to our knowledge and culture.

We recommend that the Government:

- Reviews and updates all Programmes of Study – and, where appropriate, the corresponding GCSE Subject Content – to include stronger representation of the diversity that makes up our modern society, allowing more children to see themselves in the curriculum.
- Develops the national curriculum as a digital product that can support teachers to navigate content easily and to see and make connections across key stages and disciplines.
- Develops a programme of work to provide evidence-led guidance on curriculum and pedagogical adaptation (as well as exemplification) for children and young people with SEND, including those in specialist provision, who experience various barriers to accessing the curriculum.
- Involves teachers in the testing and design of Programmes of Study as part of the drafting process. This must take into consideration the curriculum time that is available, ensuring the national curriculum is ambitious but teachable within a typical school timetable.

# Pre-16 subject recommendations

## Art and Design recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Makes limited revisions to the Key Stage 1 to 3 Art and Design Programmes of Study to clarify and exemplify the knowledge and skills pupils should develop, including through their own creative practice, reflection and critical engagement.
- Works with Ofqual and awarding organisations to clarify the volume and range of coursework students are expected to produce for GCSE Art and Design.

## Citizenship recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Introduces a statutory measure to ensure that all pupils are taught a core body of essential Citizenship content at primary (including elements of financial and media literacy, and climate change and sustainability).
- Improves the efficacy of primary Citizenship by clarifying the purpose and content of the Key Stage 1 and 2 curriculum and removes any content that duplicates the new Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) Programme of Study.

- Updates the secondary Programmes of Study for Citizenship to clarify their purpose, improve specificity and improve progression from Key Stage 3 to 4 or to the optional GCSE (including a renewed focus on financial literacy, media literacy, climate and sustainability, equality duties and challenging discrimination, and democracy and government).

## Computing recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Provides greater clarity in the Computing curriculum about what students should be taught at each key stage so that they build the essential digital literacy required for future life and work.
- Replaces GCSE Computer Science with a Computing GCSE which reflects the full breadth of the Computing curriculum and supports students to develop the digital skills they need.
- Reviews where digital skills and technologies have become an integral part of subject disciplines other than Computing. Where this is the case, it should determine whether to include this specific digital content in those subjects' Programmes of Study, sequenced and aligned with the Computing curriculum.

## Design and Technology (D&T) recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Rewrites the D&T subject aims to be more aspirational, and clarifies the purpose of study to focus on the subject's distinct body of knowledge and capabilities, with a particular focus on Key Stage 3.
- Refines the D&T curriculum and GCSE subject content to:
    - Explicitly include how to achieve sustainable resolutions to design challenges.
    - Embed the teaching of social responsibility and inclusive design explicitly within the curriculum, as appropriate to the key stage, throughout the design process.
    - Support the development of critical decision-making skills about material selection.
    - Ensure that realising designs remains integral to pupils' experience of D&T.

## Cooking and Nutrition recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Renames the subject 'Food and Nutrition' and ensures it has its own aims and purpose of study that better reflect what it covers and its discrete identity within D&T.
- Ensures that sufficient detail in the curriculum sets clear expectations about what should be taught at each key stage to reflect the fact that the subject develops skills for life as well as progression to further study.
- Reviews the level 3 vocational options for food science to determine the best means of ensuring that the needs of learners are met and that there is a strong 'pipeline' into higher education and careers.

## English recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures that the English curriculum sets out a clearer purpose, with more clarity and specificity at each key stage, including clarifying the distinction between English and literacy. This should include more clearly drawing out curriculum requirements for speaking and listening, as well as Drama. In particular, more clarity and specificity at Key Stage 3 should improve coherence between primary and secondary.
    - To support this, we recommend that the Government introduce an oracy framework to support practice and to complement the existing frameworks for reading and writing.[476]
- Reviews grammatical content to determine what content should be re-sequenced to later key stages, and what content should be removed entirely at Key Stage 2 to enable a greater focus on grammar in use rather than grammar in theory.
- Replaces the current grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS) test with an amended test, which retains some elements of the current GPS test but with new tasks to better assess composition and application of grammar and punctuation.
    - Once the new test is established in schools, the DfE may wish to consider whether the role of the test in accountability should remain as stands, or whether any changes, such as including the new test in headline measures, should be explored.

[476] DfE (2023) - The reading framework; DfE (2025) - The writing framework

- Introduces a diagnostic test in English, to be taken in Year 8, with the aim of supporting teachers to identify and address any areas of weakness before gaps widen further.
- Makes significant changes to the Key Stage 4 English Programme of Study and the GCSE English Language subject content, introducing greater clarity of purpose to focus English Language more clearly on the nature and expression of language, and to support critical analysis of a wider variety of text types and genres, including multi-modal and ephemeral text types.
- Reviews the genres specified in the English Key Stage 4 Programme of Study and GCSE English Literature subject content to ensure that students continue to study texts drawn from the recognised body of English literature (including the expectation of at least one play by Shakespeare, a selection of poetry, fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards, and at least one 19th century novel), and that they also benefit from studying texts drawn from the full breadth of our literary heritage, including more diverse and representative texts. This should not increase the volume of content.

## Drama recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Updates the Key Stage 3 English Programme of Study to include a discrete section on Drama. This should include more detail to provide greater clarity about expectations for performing, creating and responding to dramatic works. Greater specificity about Drama should be added to the Key Stage 1 and 2 English Programmes of Study, aiming to build solid foundations and support transition to Key Stage 3
- Reviews the subject content for GCSE Drama, assessment methods and the balance of assessment to ensure that the qualification is up to date, suited to the discipline and enables progression to further study and careers in drama and theatre.

## Geography recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Makes minor refinements to the Geography Programmes of Study and GCSE subject content to respond to the issues identified, including by:
    - Refining content to support progression better to further study, deepen children and young people’s understanding of key geographical concepts, make

content more relevant and inclusive, and remove unnecessary repetition across topics.

    - Embedding disciplinary knowledge more explicitly at Key Stage 3, such as geographical enquiry, spatial reasoning, use of digital tools, human geography and use of evidence, to ensure all children and young people have access to high-quality geographical education.
    - Clarifying and reinforcing requirements for fieldwork to demonstrate its role more effectively in supporting content and the developing of disciplinary knowledge, ensuring changes remain proportionate and inclusive.
- Embeds climate change and sustainability more explicitly across different key stages, including across the physical geography, geographical applications and human geography sections of the curriculum, ensuring early, coherent and more detailed engagement with climate education. This should be done without risking curriculum overload.

## History recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Adjusts the History Programmes of Study to:
    - Improve the understanding and application of disciplinary knowledge and skills through additions and amendments to the disciplinary terms used.
    - Clarify the statutory and non-statutory content requirements to better support teachers in recognising and understanding the optionality that exists across Key Stages 1 to 3.
    - Support the wider teaching of History's inherent diversity, including through the analysis of a wide range of sources and, where appropriate, local history.
- Reviews GCSE History subject content and assessment (including assessment objectives) to:
    - Ensure understanding of disciplinary knowledge is advanced and concerns about overload are tackled.
    - Ensure that assessment is fit for purpose and aligned with the aims of the GCSE.

## Languages recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Updates the Key Stage 2 Languages Programme of Study to include a clearly defined minimum core content for French, German and Spanish to standardise expectations about what 'substantial progress in one language' looks like.
- Should not make immediate changes to the new content of the GCSEs in French, German and Spanish but that the DfE should review the impact of these following the first exams in 2026.

We recommend that local authorities, multi-academy trusts and schools:

- Should explore the potential benefits of a coordinated approach in their local areas to the main language taught from Key Stage 2 through to Key Stage 4, taking account of their local context and priorities. The Government should look to encourage this activity where appropriate.

## Maths recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Retains the amount and type of content in the Key Stage 1 to 3 curriculum, but re-sequences it so that topics are introduced in such a way that pupils can master them deeply, with opportunities for more complex problem-solving in each area, and reduce repetition in later years.
- Ensures that Maths should be the subject in which pupils are exposed to mathematical concepts for the first time and the curriculum is sequenced as such. These concepts should then be applied in different contexts, where appropriate, in other subjects - for example, aspects of financial education in Citizenship.[477]
- Ensures that the Standards and Testing Agency (STA) works with DfE to refine the current non-statutory Maths test at Key Stage 1 to reflect any updates to the Maths curriculum. Alongside this, the DfE should consider ways in which it can encourage more schools to use it.
- Ensures that the STA works with the DfE to redesign Key Stage 2 assessments minimally to reflect a re-sequenced curriculum and include a stronger focus on mental arithmetic and reasoning.

[477] For example: a student should not be exposed to compound interest during their financial education in Citizenship without first having been introduced to in Maths.

- Introduces a diagnostic test in Maths, to be taken in Year 8, with the aim of supporting teachers to identify and deal with any weakness before students progress to Key Stage 4.

## Music recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Revises the content of the Programmes of Study for Key Stages 1 to 3 to ensure a curriculum pathway which gives all pupils a rigorous foundation in musical understanding and enables broader access to further study at Key Stage 4. This could be achieved by:
    - Revisiting the purpose and aims, ensuring that they better reflect intended outcomes.
    - Adding some further specificity, without increasing volume, to clarify how pupils should progress in the three pillars of musical understanding (technical, constructive and expressive), and to ensure that a range of genres and repertoires can be covered.
- Reviews the Music GCSE and Technical Award concurrently to ensure their purposes are both clear and distinct and that qualification content and assessment meet these aims. As part of this, the Government should consider:
    - GCSE assessment objectives, modes and requirements, and whether these are suited to the discipline.
    - The extent to which the most recent reforms to Technical Awards have effectively changed the purpose and suitability of the Music Technical Award, and whether this qualification is still fit for purpose or requires further adjustments.
- Explores ways to better optimise its investment in Music education to support the teaching and learning of musical instruments and the reading of music to ensure equitable access to, and progression in, Music education.

## Physical Education (PE) recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Redrafts the purpose of study for PE, retaining the importance of competitive sports, but clarifying the significance of providing all pupils with opportunities to learn in a physical environment and emphasising its physical, social, cognitive and emotional benefits that complement and enhance overall academic performance and general wellbeing.

- Redrafts the aims of PE so that they are clearer and more coherent at each key stage.
- Introduces a concise, scaffolded approach to the attainment targets and key stage subject content within the Programmes of Study. As part of this, the Government should review how the Programmes of Study refer to individual activities (such as dance, swimming and outdoor activity), including whether they are sufficiently specific to support quality teaching.
- Distinguishes clearly between mandatory core PE and qualification pathways, and develops distinct terminology for each. This can be achieved by renaming GCSE PE, and considering whether any content changes are required to ensure it retains a focus on sports science. The content of Key Stage 4 mandatory non-assessed PE should be revised to ensure that it focuses primarily on physical activity
- Reviews the current GCSE PE activity list to consider ways in which it could be made more inclusive for all students, especially for students with SEND.

## Dance recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Reviews how the PE Key Stage 1 to 4 Programmes of Study refer to Dance, including whether they are sufficiently specific to support high-quality teaching and students' progression, including to further study.
- Reviews the subject content, balance of assessment and assessment methods of GCSE Dance so that the qualification is inclusive, representative and better suited to the discipline.

## Religious Education (RE) recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Adds RE to the national curriculum in due course. A staged approach should be taken, in line with the following steps:
    - **Stage 1:**

      Representatives from faith groups, secular groups and the wider teaching and education sector that we heard from during the Review should build on the constructive and collaborative work they have been doing through the course of the Review. DfE should invite the sector to form a task and finish group, convened and led by an expert Chair who is independent of any particular secular or faith group interest or representation. The Review recommends that, given her leadership of this strand of the Review's work (based on her expertise), Dr Vanessa Ogden CBE should undertake this

role, ensuring momentum in the successful convening she has established. This group should liaise with relevant external parties and, building on the existing National Content Standard for RE in England, engage with faith and non-faith schools, as well as RE organisations and faith communities, to co-create a draft RE curriculum.

Whilst this work should be sector-led, the DfE should welcome efforts the sector makes to reach a consensus and support and facilitate this group where necessary.

Alongside this, the DfE should consider the legislative framework for RE, including, for example, what any changes to its status in the curriculum would mean for functions such as Standing Advisory Councils on RE (SACREs). A long-term plan for implementing potential changes to legislation should be drafted.

As part of this review, the DfE should consider removing the statutory requirement for learners in school sixth forms to study RE.

In parallel, the DfE should review the non-statutory guidance for RE, which has not been updated since 2010, to establish whether beneficial changes to subject content could be made in the short term that do not pre-empt the wider work the Review is recommending.

- **Stage 2:**

  If consensus on a draft RE curriculum can be reached, the DfE should conduct a formal consultation on the detailed content.

  Alongside this, the DfE should consult on proposed changes to the legislative framework, including any proposal to repeal the requirement to teach RE in school sixth forms.

## Science recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures more cohesion and consistency across the primary Science curriculum, including clearer guidance on what should be taught, to what depth, at each stage.
- At all key stages, bases the Science curriculum on the fundamental concepts of each individual discipline so that students develop deep scientific and disciplinary knowledge and skills. In light of this, the Government should consider where content can be streamlined, especially at GCSE, without affecting rigour or the subject's knowledge-rich focus.

- Ensures that the curriculum more clearly articulates the purpose and expectations of high-quality practical work in supporting the building of substantive knowledge and the development of important skills and procedural knowledge.
- Ensures that, in relevant areas, the Science curriculum explicitly develops students' understanding of the scientific principles that explain climate change and sustainability and the global efforts to tackle them.
- Introduces an entitlement to Triple Science at GCSE, so that any student who wants to study Triple Science has the opportunity to do so.

## Key Stage 4 Technical Awards recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Allows the reformed Key Stage 4 Technical Awards to embed fully in the system before the DfE considers implementing further significant reforms.
- Should prepare to review the reformed Technical Awards from 2027 with attention given to:
    - Attainment and completion rates, functioning of assessments, stakeholders' views and other relevant data.
    - How content supports progression to 16-19 pathways, including those which will have been reformed.
    - Whether the structural requirements defined in the technical guidance, including assessment requirements, supports the broader purpose of Technical Awards whilst ensuring they remain rigorous and reliable.
- Should encourage awarding organisations to update Key Stage 4 Technical Awards to improve progression to the updated 16-19 pathways, if the 16-19 'third pathway' of V Levels is developed and linked to occupational standards.
- Maintains the current moratorium on new Technical Awards to ensure stability and effective monitoring, except where evidence of demand for a new qualification or substantive feedback on existing qualifications is exceptionally compelling (for example, this Review's recommendation relating to the Technical Award for Music).

# Accountability, performance measures and assessment

## Accountability recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Removes the EBacc performance measures and the associated EBacc entry and attainment headline accountability measures.
- Retains Progress 8 (and Attainment 8) with no changes to its structure or subject composition, but renames the current EBacc bucket to ‘Academic Breadth’ bucket.
- Continues to develop initiatives related to similar schools, with a particular emphasis on supporting inclusive approaches within accountability measures.

## Primary assessment recommendations

## Key Stage 1

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures that the STA works with the DfE to find ways to encourage take-up of optional Key Stage 1 assessments.
- Ensures that the STA works with DfE to explore approaches for assessing progress for the small minority of pupils with certain SEND needs that make the Phonics Screening Check inaccessible. This assessment should be administered in the school setting.

## Key Stage 2

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures that the STA works with DfE to explore if access arrangements can be refined for pupils with certain SEND that make the Multiplication Tables Check inaccessible. This assessment should continue to be administered in a school setting.
- Develops an improved teacher assessment framework to provide teachers with clarity and include a greater focus on writing fluency.
- Reviews external moderation processes and look to strengthen peer moderation between schools, with the aim of embedding good practice to improve moderation in years where schools are not selected for external moderation and improving consistency between external judgements.

- Replaces the current grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS) test with an amended test, which retains some elements of the current GPS test but with new tasks to better assess composition and application of grammar and punctuation.
    - Once the new test is established in schools, the DfE may wish to consider whether the role of the test in accountability remain as stands, or whether any changes, such as including the new test in headline measures, should be explored.

## Secondary assessment recommendations

## Key Stage 3

We recommend that the Government:

- Introduces diagnostic assessment for key components of Maths and English to be taken during Year 8 to support teachers to address students' needs and ensure that they are well prepared to progress into Key Stage 4.
- Commissions the design and trialling of the test, with a view to making it mandatory if the pilots demonstrate that this is an effective approach.

## Key Stage 4

<u>Volume of assessment</u>

We recommend that the Government:

- Works with Ofqual, seeking to reduce overall exam time by at least 10%, focusing on assessment design choices to deliver this reduction, and going further than this where possible. This should be considered on a subject-by-subject basis, ensuring minimal impact on reliability, fairness and teaching and learning.
- Works with Ofqual to introduce a design principle that considers of the volume of exam assessment as a priority. The DfE and Ofqual should explore a range of options within each subject to seek to minimise exam length whilst ensuring minimal negative impact on reliability, fairness, teaching and learning and system resilience.
- Ensures that, in implementing the above recommendations, each subject retains at least two assessment components.

Method of assessment

We recommend that the Government:

- Continues to employ the principle that non-exam assessment should be used only when it is the only valid way to assess essential elements of a subject.
- Ensures that assessment approaches continue to be derived from the nature and structure of subject content, ensuring that what is assessed reflects what is most important for students to learn and do. Changes to the balance of assessment should only be made where this reflects changes to the content.
- Ensures that the DfE and Ofqual work closely with the wider education sector to explore how core aspects of subject content can be retained and assessed whilst managing and mitigating the risk of generative AI.
- Ensures that the DfE and Ofqual continue to consider the full range of options for assessment methods, including non-exam assessment, where it would be necessary to mitigate the risks posed by generative AI.
- Ensures that the DfE and Ofqual continue to work together to explore potential for innovation in on-screen assessment in GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications, particularly where this could further support accessibility for students with SEND and where this could reduce exam volume in the future. We recommend they continue to review the evidence and carefully consider risks and benefits.

Accessibility for students with SEND

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures that Ofqual, awarding organisations and the DfE work together to consider how awarding organisations can build accessibility into the design of new specifications for GCSEs, AS and A Levels.

Provision of formulae and equations in exams

We recommend that the Government:

- Ensures that, when updating the Maths and Science GCSEs, subject experts evaluate each formula and equation to determine whether students should be required to memorise and recall it, or whether assessment should focus on their ability to apply it when provided.

# 16-19 education

## 16-19 level 3 pathways recommendations

## V Levels recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Introduces a revised third pathway at level 3 to sit alongside the academic and technical pathways. This pathway should be based on new qualifications, which we recommend calling V Levels.
    - V Levels should provide high-quality qualifications for those young people that want a broader or mixed level 3 pathway with applied components. They should sit alongside A Levels and T Levels as a coherent third pathway at level 3. V Levels should have employer, further/higher education credibility and be designed for longevity. To ensure this, V Levels should be regulated by Ofqual and content should be linked to occupational standards at a broad, sector level.
    - V Levels should meet a range of ambitious quality criteria that ensure that they provide the knowledge and skills required for learners to successfully progress to related employment or further study at a higher level. Destination outcomes should be key among these. Providers should also seek to develop appropriate employer encounters and work experience as part of learners' overall study programme, as per current practice.
- Considers learners who have SEND or face other barriers to education to ensure that the qualifications are inclusive by design.

(We also make more detailed recommendations for the design and implementation of V Levels, including on qualification size, subject areas, assessment and grading, and transition).

## T Levels recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Continues to work closely with awarding organisations to reduce the assessment burden of T Level assessment in the context of scale up.
- Increases its work with Skills England to support and drive forward employer engagement with 16-19 education, particularly from employers involved in the design of T Levels, with a view to growing the number of industry placement and work encounter opportunities for learners.

- Considers, in relation to the above, a robust and creative approach to incentivising employers and linking employers more closely into the skills system.
- Continues work with providers and HEIs to ensure that young people are well advised on the implications of study choices for their futures and to promote understanding of T Levels by HE providers.
- Ensures that the content for T Levels remains up to date and that the amount of content can be delivered within the time available, and that it should seek opportunities to review and reduce content where necessary.

## 16-19 level 2 pathways recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Introduces two separate pathways at level 2 (an occupational pathway and a pathway to level 3), each serving different purposes and designed specifically to meet these purposes and improve student outcomes. These should be focused and ambitious pathways to ensure that all level 2 offers are valuable and high-quality.
- Whilst a new pathway to level 3 is being developed, we recommend that the TLFY is strengthened by:
    - Exploring whether all students should be expected to take an existing qualification as part of the TLFY.
    - Renaming the TLFY as soon as possible to make clear that the programme supports broader progression to level 3 pathways, not only T Levels.

## 16-19 Maths and English recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Strengthens the accountability system and explores opportunities to better incentivise effective practice across the sector.
- Introduces new level 1 stepped qualifications for Maths and English Language at 16-19, to enable learners to make progress towards achieving level 2 in these GCSEs during 16-19 study. The Review Panel recommends these qualifications are:
    - One-year, level 1 qualifications for 16 to 19-year-olds with prior attainment of a grade 1 or 2 at GCSE.
    - Designed to focus teaching on mastery of the fundamentals, addressing knowledge gaps from earlier key stages in steps and enabling learners to build confidence in all areas of the GCSE up to the equivalent of grade 3.

- Assessed in a modular way to allow learners to build up and 'bank' their progress, giving accreditation for modules learners have passed.
- Graded up to the equivalent of a strong GCSE grade 3, thereby putting learners who have achieved this level 1 qualification in a strong position to resit the GCSE the following year and thereby achieve level 2 during 16-19 study.

## Non-qualification activity recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Strengthens guidance for 16-19 study programmes to promote effective practice in delivering non-qualification activity and to clarify expectations about the types of activities that should be core to the enrichment offer. The focus should be on applied knowledge and transferable skills that will enable learners to step confidently into adulthood.
- Considers whether certain elements of non-qualification activity should be made mandatory so that learners' access to opportunities is more consistent.

## Future curriculum reviews recommendations

We recommend that the Government:

- Limits the intervals between holistic curriculum reviews to approximately a decade.
- Supplements holistic reviews with a rolling programme of light-touch minimalist updates (conducted by the DfE with support from its agencies) of the national curriculum and its Programmes of Study, with a threefold aim of:
    - Ensuring the national curriculum remains up to date;[478]
    - Addressing any specific issues arising; and
    - Ensuring that the volume of content remains appropriate and deliverable.
- Ensures that future reviews set clear objectives at the outset, adopt a rigorous evidence-led approach and undertake public consultation. The Government should also ensure that future reviews strike an appropriate balance between external expert input and central coordination and that it evaluates the likely impact of any proposed changes, including considering the capacity and workload of professionals and educational institutions.

[478] Including addressing ongoing changes in content and role of digital technology.

**Curriculum and Assessment Review**



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