

# Response ID ANON-B1Q8-J1KG-9

Submitted to Curriculum and Assessment Review  
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Foreword from the Review Chair

Background to the Review

Why does the Review matter?

What is in scope of the Review?

About this call for evidence

Who is this call for evidence for?

Section 1: About you

1 Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

Section 1: About you

3 If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, which of the below best describes which part of the sector your organisation represents?  
[If more than one applies, please select the one that you think is most important to understanding your consultation response.]

Charity, social enterprise organisation or non-profit organisation

Please describe:

4 What is the name of your organisation?

Organisation name:

National Governance Association

5 What is your role within the organisation?

Job role:

Head of Policy and Research

Section 1: About you

6 What is your name?

Name:

Fiona Fearon

7 What is your email address?[Please note: If you are willing to be contacted about your submission, please provide your email address. You do not have to give your email address, and your views will be considered whether or not you provide this.]

Email address:

fiona.fearon@nga.org.uk

8 Are you happy to be contacted directly about your response?[Please note: The Review may wish to contact you directly about your responses to help our understanding of the issues. If we do, we will use the email address you have given above.]

Yes

9 Would you like us to keep your responses confidential?

No

Reason for confidentiality:

## Definitions

### Section 2: General views on curriculum, assessment, and qualifications pathways

10 What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways are working well to support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

What is working well?:

11 What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

What should be improved?:

Curriculum:

NGA conducted a snap survey Friday 15th November – Tuesday 19th November 2024. One question asked respondents “What aspects of the current curriculum should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?”. The top improvements were:

Emphasis on skills - 41%

Greater focus on non-core subjects - 30%

Inclusive curriculum - 11%

Reduce amount of content - 11%

Other - 7%

1. Emphasis on skills (41%) – respondents felt the curriculum needs to be modernized to reflect the current world context including skills that will be useful to children in adult life. Example comments included:

- “There should be more emphasis on skills than knowledge. Grammar knowledge required is far too complex and so boring for the children to learn. It doesn't improve creative writing, it restricts it. More time spent on e-safety, personal safety and emotional wellbeing, with a clear and quantifiable reduction in time spent on academic subjects (except English & Maths) to reduce pressures on staff.”
- “Our young people need financial / money skills, food preparation / healthy eating as basic life skills.”
- “In KS4 it would be helpful for young people to learn some essential life skills; eg how to budget; general introduction to finance - bank accounts; risks of overdrafts; savings options, how the stock market works; how to write a cv; how to do a job interview.”
- “The national curriculum is so outdated - danger of having a national curriculum at all = not keeping pace with a changing world - not reflecting society or future focused less knowledge focused and more skills focused from a young age, especially thinking skills - what is the point of knowing something if you can't do anything with cognitively or practically?”

2. Greater focus on non-core subjects (27%) – Respondents highlighted the need for a broader curriculum, highlighting the need for subjects like the arts to have equal prevalence. Example comments included:

- “The curriculum needs to have a broader arts base to provide experience of music and art to develop creativity Business and enterprise should be available to all.”
- “Curriculum urgently needs rebalancing between academic and creative aspects to give those students whose strengths lie in creative/performance areas (art, music, dance, poetry, acting, etc.) parity of esteem with academic areas.”
- “The arts and in particular music education are terribly overlooked and not supported. Creative arts are also treated as an afterthought in many schools and creative thinking is not encouraged enough.”

3. Reduce amount of content in favour of quality (11%) – respondents detailed the broadness of the curriculum needs to be balanced against the quality of content

- “Key Stage 3/4 curriculum should be less 'full' in terms of knowledge, giving teachers more space for creativity (their own and their students) and to develop transferable skills through the application of the knowledge they are learning.”
- “It needs reducing. It is now too broad and it risks becoming quantity of curriculum rather the quality of curriculum.”
- “Less content in KS2, make up less Secondary focused by returning elements to KS3.”

4. Inclusive curriculum (11%) – respondents want to see more vocational courses on offer as well as courses that are better suited to differing abilities.

Example comments included:

- “The curriculum in languages means that pupils are asked to write and talk about their personal life- e.g. holidays, family, leisure activities, hobbies, their home. This disadvantages those who are already disadvantaged who either have little to draw on or for those where this topics are sensitive. A better approach would be to have a stimulus based on the culture of the places where the languages is spoken which could be used to prompt spoken and written responses.”
- “Courses are needed which enable low achievers to access suitable provision and may include more practical options.”

5. Other (7%) – Respondents other comments related to an increased focus on literacy, eradicating benchmarking. And renaming British values as human values. Example comments included:

- “Get rid of benchmarking test which had to be carried out in the first few weeks of school and simply prevents EYFS staff from getting on with the job.”
- “Literacy needs to have more dedicated school hours as it underpins the entire curriculum.”

Exams and assessment:

NGA believes that pupils need to be given the best possible opportunity for a successful life after school and the qualification system must offer high-quality vocational and academic qualifications.

The drive to pre-pandemic grade distribution also underlines trends that existed in 2019 and the need to look at exam reform seriously. This includes the continued disparity and outperformance of girls compared to boys and the need for an exam system that benefits the 'forgotten third', those young people who won't achieve at least a grade 4 standard pass in GCSE English and maths by the end of 12 years of schooling.

As an organisation that is steered by the voices of its members, NGA has sought the views of members on exams and assessment reform repeatedly and regularly including through our Annual Governance Survey, Exams Working Group and snap survey.

Annual Governance Survey:

Our most recent data from the AGS also echoes the opinion that changes are needed to the exams and assessment system.

In 2022 we asked respondents about the future of exams. Overall, 64% of respondents said that there should be amendments to the exam system on the awarding of grades in 2022 and beyond. The findings show a mixed picture highlighting the variety of views that our membership holds.

The most popular view was that TAGs (teacher assessed grades) should be a factor that contributes to the awarding of grades for GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications (27%) in 2022 and beyond. A quarter (25%) believed the awarding of grades should return to the usual exams and assessments set by exam boards but with adaptations, 20% said awarding of grades should return to usual exams and assessments set by exam boards, and 15% said none of the above. Only 12% of respondents felt that TAGs should be the only method of awarding grades for students.

We also asked people to expand on their views and these were the most common:

- "Take this opportunity to introduce a new system."

- "I would prefer a mixed approach weighted in favour of formal examinations, followed by final year continuous assessment, and finally backed up by teacher assessment / confirmation."

- "To ensure a fair system the combination of teacher assessment along with exams should be able to give a fairer assessment as some students are better in exams where others are better in less stressful conditions."

- "It will mean a lot of extra work for the staff but this seems to be the fairest way of approaching the grades assessment."

- "Needs to be exam board NOT teacher led Must be an external, independent assessment Papers need choice or modified curriculum content must be announced EARLY."

- "I am conscious of the high level of pressure placed on teachers for the assessment of grades this summer and would prefer to see set exams as the main driver unless there are extenuating circumstances for pupils."

NGA snap survey:

NGA conducted a snap survey Friday 15th November – Tuesday 19th November 2024. One question asked respondents "What aspects of the current assessment system and qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?". The top improvements were:

Reform exam assessment and qualification content - 43%

Other - 26%

Removal of high stakes accountability - 13%

Remove Primary school assessment - 9%

Improve vocational qualifications - 9%

1. Reform exam assessment and qualification content (43%) – respondents highlighted the desire to redefine what core skills are in turn change the form of assessment to move away from summative, memory-based assessment. Suggestions included teacher assessed grades (TAGs). Respondents also wanted to see qualifications/assessments that recognise and are adapted to all abilities including children with SEND. Example comments were:

- "There should be qualifications which recognise the achievements of lower achievers."

- "Maths and English GCSE outcomes fail nearly half the 16 year olds taking them. Many go on to resit at college and fail again Passes at Level 4 are currently a crucial gateway to work and further study look at ASDAN for alternatives to providing appropriate literacy and numeracy."

- "Reliance on recall-based traditional exams is ridiculous in the digital age, when information can be accessed so easily."

- "Recognise that the world is now changing faster than at any point in history The whole education system needs to redefine the core skills required for the exponential age For a start - less focus on remembering things and more on how to use the internet and AI to solve problems"

2. Other (26%) – We also received a range of other comments that had a varied focus. These included offering better careers advice and support to enable students to make more informed choices, creating a national set of exams and making no changes at all. Example comments were:

- "Better careers advice and support"

- "A radical solution would be the creation of a range of national exams to replace the group of competing commercial entities whose aim is principally to make money. That would level the playing field for students and employers and higher education would know better how to understand levels."

- "Fewer high stakes examinations to enable schools to deliver a broader curriculum more targeted to the needs of specific children."

- "Don't mess too much with the system. It is working and people understand it. When taught well it is good at all key stages. Don't make it too complicated."

3. Removing high stakes accountability (13%) – these comments focused on removing the pressure on schools to achieve high exam results, also lessening the pressure on pupils. Example comments included:

- "Scrap all tests in primary schools - they put huge pressure on children & the curriculum with the only 'benefit' being results to blame schools for."

- "As Chair of a Federation of 2 primary schools, we need to reduce the fixation of KS1 and KS2 outcomes as the sole indicator of a school's success and suitability. Publishing league tables of results with no additional context is misleading and mis-represents the quality of education that a school

provides.”

### Section 3: Social justice and inclusion

12 In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

Barriers for socioeconomically disadvantaged:

The cost of accessing the curriculum is the primary barrier for children from families who are experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. NGA's Disadvantage: Widening the Lens (WTL) resources brings together a host of research from across sectors highlighting this. This includes the cost of school uniform and PE kits, the cost of curriculum resources, including the arts and technology, as well as extra-curricular activities that enhance learning and provide opportunity for broadened aspirations and engagement. When a child is not able to participate in activities due to cost it in turn can cause social exclusion resulting in disengagement.

Governance plays a critical role in addressing these barriers. School governing boards are uniquely positioned to influence how schools use funding, such as Pupil Premium to address these barriers, but the funding challenges faced by the sector hinder this.

13 In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)

Barriers based on protected characteristics:

NGA believes a diverse curriculum should be inclusive of the experiences and histories of under-represented groups and allow children and young people to see and be seen in the curriculum. Diversity should not be an add on to the current offer, but rather embedded and woven throughout.

Governing boards have an important role in ensuring a culture of equality, diversity and inclusion in their schools and trusts. Through the decisions they make and the scrutiny and support they give, they can drive significant progress and impact for leaders, staff and pupils.

NGA's AGS data reveals:

The percentage of respondents who reported the appointment of support staff as the biggest challenge facing their school/trust in relation to pupils with SEND rose from 23% in 2023 to 27% in 2024.

Following the initial publication of the WTL toolkits chairs and vice-chairs of governing boards shared the following examples of successful initiatives they are engaged in aimed at creating a more inclusive, representative, and equitable curriculum.

Key actions and 'what works well' from governing boards:

Representation in curriculum and resources:

Ensuring the curriculum and resources reflect the diversity of the school community. One school highlighted the value of the Representation Matters programme (<https://www.repatters.co.uk/>), which supported their efforts to make learning materials more inclusive.

Diversifying the Curriculum:

- Collaborating with staff and leadership: One school engaged the whole school staff team, with a strong drive from the headteacher and senior leadership team (SLT), to explore anti-racism in practice and diversify the curriculum.

- Working with local authorities: Schools partnered with councils like Hackney Council on decolonising the curriculum as part of broader anti-racism agendas.

- Addressing knowledge gaps: Schools evaluated textbooks and teaching materials, working with experts such as Professor Paul Miller and other stakeholders. These efforts were tied to initiatives aimed at reducing Black student exclusions and improving attainment, with resources and toolkits launched to incorporate student voice into the process.

NGA recommendations therefore include:

Increase representation in the curriculum:

- As set out in NGA's disadvantage toolkit on ethnicity (<https://www.nga.org.uk/knowledge-centre/disadvantage-in-education/>), when mapping out the curriculum offer, it is important for schools (and the government) to include writers and resources from a variety of cultures, to promote a diversity of voices, thoughts and perspectives. Conversations around these texts not only allow pupils belonging to the same groups to "see and be seen" but it also broadens the outlooks of all pupils in the classroom. These conversations should be discussed with nuance and relevant context.

- Recruitment and retention of specialised staff needs to be prioritised:

Any changes made to the curriculum and assessment framework require staff with the skills and expertise needed to deliver it and achieve success for pupils with protected characteristics.

- Go beyond surface-level inclusion

Provide accurate and nuanced depictions of history, such as colonialism, while also allowing pupils to see themselves in non-reductive ways. For example, Black history is rich and diverse and should not be limited to topics such as transatlantic slavery and civil rights movements - important though these are - but should also encompass a broader spectrum of achievements, cultures, and contributions.

14 In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

Barriers based on SEND:

Governing boards have statutory responsibilities for pupils with SEND.

NGA's AGS 2024 data reveals:

- The proportion of boards identifying support for children with special educational needs as a top challenge for their school/trust has risen dramatically to 37%, from 25% in 2022.

- Those reporting access to funding as their biggest challenge facing their school/trust in relation to pupils with SEND has risen from 66% in 2023 to 74% in 2024.

- Over half of respondents reported that engagement with the local authority/support services is also a top challenge facing schools/trusts (58%) in relation to pupils with SEND.

- The percentage of respondents who reported that the appointment of support staff e.g. TAs was the biggest challenge facing their school/trust in relation to pupils with SEND rose from 23% to 27% in 2024.

NGA's disadvantage toolkit on SEND (<https://www.nga.org.uk/media/rqshstikr/nga-disadvantage-toolkit-send-20231123.pdf>) also highlights the experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND are often poor, with provision and interventions being inconsistent and delayed. This inconsistency can lead to unmet needs, causing students to fall behind academically compared to their peers without SEND.

Ultimately, the combination of increased demand for support, cost pressures and reduced capacity within local authorities means that, for many schools and trusts, the necessary improvements to provision and outcomes are beyond the capacity of boards and their staff.

NGA recommendations on SEND therefore include:

- Increased funding. However, this alone will not be enough. There needs to be improved working between education, health and care to help ensure that learners with SEND receive the help they need as early as possible, allowing them to successfully access the curriculum and exams/qualifications.

- Recruitment and retention of specialised staff needs to be prioritised. Any changes made to the curriculum and assessment framework require staff with the skills and expertise needed to deliver it and achieve success for SEND pupils.

- Resource for mainstream schools. If the intention is to support more learners with SEND in mainstream settings, then mainstream schools should be equipped to meet their needs.

- Less summative assessment. At present, the curriculum has a significant focus on summative assessments that inform the majority of/the entire grade, which can disadvantage pupils with SEND who can benefit from more frequent formative assessments. The latter approach allows for regular feedback and new adjustments to approaches in learning if necessary. Assessment format in the existing curriculum is also relatively restricted, with an overwhelming focus on writing that disadvantages pupils with certain additional needs. Alternative assessment methods, such as oral presentations, project-based learning, or practical demonstrations could support these pupils.

- A future outlook. Looking beyond their time in school, there needs to be a focus on ensuring that learners with SEND are prepared for life after education and so any curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways should aim to do this.

15 In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any enablers that support attainment, progress, access or participation for the groups listed above? [e.g. socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, pupils with SEND, pupils who are otherwise vulnerable, and young people with protected characteristics]

Enablers:

Section 4: Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English

16 To what extent does the content of the national curriculum at primary level (key stages 1 and 2) enable pupils to gain an excellent foundation in a) English and b) maths? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim? [Please note, we invite views specifically on transitions between key stages in section 9.]

English and maths - primary content:

17 To what extent do the English and maths primary assessments\* support pupils to gain an excellent foundation in these key subjects? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support this aim? \*These include SATs at the end of key stage 2, the phonics screening check and the multiplication tables check.

English and maths - primary assessment:

18 To what extent does the content of the a) English and b) maths national curriculum at secondary level (key stages 3 and 4) equip pupils with the knowledge and skills they need for life and further study? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim?

English and maths - secondary content:

19 To what extent do the current maths and English qualifications at a) pre-16 and b) 16-19 support pupils and learners to gain, and adequately demonstrate that they have achieved, the skills and knowledge they need? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support these outcomes?

English and maths - qualifications:

20 How can we better support learners who do not achieve level 2 in English and maths by 16 to learn what they need to thrive as citizens in work and life? In particular, do we have the right qualifications at level 2 for these 16-19 learners (including the maths and English study requirement)?

Support for learners who do not achieve level 2 by 16:

21 Are there any particular challenges with regard to the English and maths a) curricula and b) assessment for learners in need of additional support (e.g. learners with SEND, socioeconomic disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL))? Are there any changes you would suggest to overcome these challenges?

Challenges with curricula and assessment - changes to overcome these:

## Section 5: Curriculum and qualification content

22 Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects\* where: a) there is too much content; not enough content; or content is missing; b) the content is out-of-date; c) the content is unhelpfully sequenced (for example to support good curriculum design or pedagogy); d) there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)? Please provide detail on specific key stages where appropriate. \*This includes both qualifications where the government sets content nationally, and anywhere the content is currently set by awarding organisations.

Subject content:

A) Governing boards have an important responsibility to ensure their school offers pupils a broad and rich curriculum, and creative teaching and learning is a core component of this. This includes many diverse and wide-ranging art forms and creative and cultural experiences providing pupils with a variety of ways to develop their cultural capital. Each art form has individual qualities, drawing on unique skills, and different learning opportunities.

While delivering a broad and balanced curriculum is a top strategic priority for governing boards, a worrying 59% of respondents have reported reducing the teaching of or cutting certain subjects due to budget constraints (AGS 2024).

Arts participation enables self-expression and provides a chance to take stock of life. People who take part in the arts are 38% more likely to report good health; and after engaging in participatory arts activities, 82% report greater wellbeing. (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing Inquiry, 2017).

According to the current national curriculum, arts in schools includes art and design, music, dance, drama and media arts. In key stages 1 to 3, arts and design and music are compulsory subjects. There are minimum requirements for drama to be delivered within the English curriculum and dance within physical education. None of the arts subjects are compulsory after the age of 14, but all pupils in maintained schools have a statutory entitlement to be able to study an arts subject. While we recognise the importance of academic subjects, the current high-stakes accountability system often leads to a greater focus on these areas at the expense of arts, sport, and culture. This imbalance risks depriving pupils of the opportunities to develop creativity, resilience and wellbeing - essential qualities that arts and physical education foster and which are critical to a well-rounded education.

As such, NGA calls for schools to be sufficiently funded to deliver arts, sport, culture, and other creative subjects and for these subjects to be prioritised within the curriculum, ensuring all pupils have equitable access to the wide-ranging benefits these areas provide.

D) Our ongoing engagement with our membership has consistently revealed that boards are concerned that the development of curriculum delivery is

restrained through a generic lack of flexibility on offer to the wider profession. While the DfE's workload taskforce under the previous government made some steps forwards in addressing this, the general feeling of restraint remains prevalent among governing boards.

For instance, the variation in exercising discretion over the actual amount of planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time, above the basic threshold entitlement, and the variation in how this can be accessed, has been cited anecdotally and within our survey responses as a barrier for enhancing content and improving delivery.

The existing workload related external pressures on school leaders, teachers and support staff significantly contributes to the persistent recruitment and retention challenges. High workload, well-being concerns and pay are cited by governing boards as the primary factors driving staffing difficulties for schools and trusts, greatly affecting their ability to attract and retain personnel. This is all well documented, but the impact of workload on curriculum offering, planning and delivery is a growing concern among our membership.

It is clear that significant changes are needed to ensure that school staff have the time they need to do their jobs that we all need them to do, but NGA would urge that further consideration be given to the work of the previous workload taskforce, and the government considers how it will carry on a collaborative, proactive series of discussions particularly on developing further access to flexible working mechanisms to make the profession more attractive, sustainable with an appropriately weighted designation to not just lesson planning and marking, but also to professionals refining and mastering their professional content and delivery.

23 Are there particular changes that could be made to ensure the curriculum (including qualification content) is more diverse and representative of society?

Changes to ensure curriculum is more diverse and representative of society:

NGA's view is that the requirement for a daily act of Collective Worship should be abolished for schools which do not have a religious character. Worship implies belief in a particular faith - if the 'act of worship' is not in your faith then it is meaningless as an act of worship.

Further expansion on this question can be found in our answer to question 13.

24 To what extent does the current curriculum (including qualification content) support students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about, and respect, others? Are there elements that could be improved?

Respect for others:

25 In which ways does the current primary curriculum support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for life and further study, and what could we change to better support this?

Primary - skills and knowledge needed for life and further study:

26 In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

Secondary - skills and knowledge for life and further study:

NGA has been heavily involved in the review of the Gatsby benchmarks 10 years on from their initial launch. We support the small but significant changes made following the review and are pleased that the changes will be reflected in the statutory guidance in the spring term.

27 In which ways do the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

16-19 - skills and knowledge for life and further study:

## Section 6: A broad and balanced curriculum

28 To what extent does the current primary curriculum support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

primary - broad and balanced:

Governors and trustees have a key role in ensuring that the school/trust's curriculum offer is broad and balanced such that pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education and adult life. It is right that content on environmental sustainability is included within science, geography, and citizenship, in the primary curriculum. However, as environmental sustainability affects all aspects of life it should therefore be reflected in all subjects for the curriculum to be considered broad and balanced.

In NGA's AGS 2022, 63% of respondents governing in primary schools said their school provided opportunities for outdoor learning e.g. forest school, visits or trips. The most common of these being Forest School.

Although we applaud most schools partaking in some form of outdoor learning, the new curriculum must ensure all children in Primary schools access their local and national environment. As well as learning about global environments.

In a culture of accountability and push for attainment data, NGA calls for balance in the curriculum, where subjects and content like environmental

sustainability are at risk of being pushed aside.

29 To what extent do the current secondary curriculum and, qualifications pathways support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

secondary - broad and balanced:

Governors and trustees have a key role in ensuring that the school/trust's curriculum offer is broad and balanced such that pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education and adult life. It is right that content on environmental sustainability is included within science, geography, and citizenship, in the secondary curriculum. We are also happy to see additions like the Natural History GCSE and content within the environmental science A-level. However, as environmental sustainability affects all aspects of life it should therefore be reflected in all subjects for the curriculum to be considered broad and balanced.

In NGA's 2022 AGS, 63% of respondents governing in primary schools said their school provided opportunities for outdoor learning e.g. forest school, visits or trips. This figure drops to just 14% for secondary schools. Although we applaud some schools partaking in some form of outdoor learning, the new curriculum must ensure all children in Secondary schools access their local and national environments. As well as learning about global environments.

In a culture of accountability and push for attainment data, NGA calls for balance in the curriculum, where subjects and content like environmental sustainability are at risk of being pushed aside.

30 To what extent do the current qualifications pathways at 16-19 support learners to study a broad curriculum which gives them the right knowledge and skills to progress? Should anything change to better support this?

16-19 - broad and balanced:

31 To what extent do the current curriculum (at primary and secondary) and qualifications pathways (at secondary and 16-19) ensure that pupils and learners are able to develop creative skills and have access to creative subjects?

support for creative skills and access to creative subjects:

## Section 6: A broad and balanced curriculum

32 Do you have any explanations for the trends outlined in the analysis and/or suggestions to address any that might be of concern?

Explanations of trends or suggestions to address:

In our AGS 2024, 59% of respondents reported reducing the teaching of or cutting certain subjects due to budget constraints.

Over a quarter of respondents (27%) cited a lack of qualified teachers as the top challenge for schools and trusts in delivering a broad and balanced curriculum. Many respondents specifically mentioned difficulties in recruiting staff for sciences, computing, food, and design technology. 18% of respondents said that a lack of time was a challenge when delivering a broad and balanced curriculum, with some respondents reporting that their school or trust is spending more time on core subjects in a bid to raise attainment.

There was, however, variation by phase: 53% of those governing in secondary schools identified a lack of qualified teachers as the biggest challenge, while 63% of primary school governors cited budget constraints as a greater issue. Time constraints were also less of an issue for those governing in secondary schools (12%) when compared to primary schools (24%).

Among respondents governing secondary schools, including those with sixth forms, 14% mentioned other challenges, with a significant number noting that not enough pupils opted to take certain subjects to make delivery viable.

Those governing in maintained schools (62%) were significantly more likely to consider budget constraints a challenge to delivering a broad and balanced curriculum than their SAT (42%) counterparts and slightly more than MAT trustees (57%). They were, however, less likely to consider a lack of qualified teachers as a challenge (17%) than MAT (37%) and SAT (42%) governing boards.

## Section 6: A broad and balanced curriculum

33 To what extent and how do pupils benefit from being able to take vocational or applied qualifications in secondary schools alongside more academically focused GCSEs?

secondary - benefit from vocational qualifications:

Under the 2010 coalition government, education policy shifted towards a narrow academic focus, placing greater emphasis on core subjects and moving away from what Michael Gove referred to as 'airy fairy' subjects. It is our view that this change, coupled with the restriction or removal of vocational pathways, has excluded groups of pupils who benefit from more practical, hands-on learning opportunities. These pupils, often disengaged by a purely academic approach, are left without access to qualifications that align with their strengths, interests, and future aspirations.

This exclusion disproportionately affects those from disadvantaged backgrounds, pupils with special educational needs, and those at risk of disengagement, limiting their progression into further education, training, or employment. By sidelining vocational pathways, the education system has



missed an opportunity to provide a broader, more inclusive curriculum that equips all pupils with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in an increasingly diverse and skills-based economy. A more balanced approach is needed to ensure every pupil can succeed, regardless of their preferred learning style or future goals.

- Access to vocational or applied qualifications alongside academically focused GCSEs in secondary schools provides a more inclusive and personalised pathway to education.
- Vocational qualifications allow pupils to engage with practical, hands-on learning that aligns with their interests and strengths, particularly for those who may not thrive in a purely academic setting. This can increase motivation, engagement and a sense of achievement, which are key drivers for both personal development and academic engagement.
- Vocational qualifications offer insights into specific industries and careers, equipping pupils with practical skills and knowledge that can lead directly to employment or further training. This early exposure helps bridge the gap between education and the workplace.
- Combining vocational and academic qualifications provides pupils with a balanced education. It enables them to develop both theoretical knowledge and practical expertise, opening multiple post-16 pathways, including apprenticeships, further education and higher education.
- They can also be a powerful tool for social mobility, particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. By providing clear routes into employment and further training, they help pupils build a more secure future and contribute to closing attainment and opportunity gaps.
- Practical, skill-based learning builds confidence and self-efficacy. Pupils gain a sense of accomplishment from creating tangible outcomes, which can positively influence their attitudes toward education and their broader personal growth.

34 To what extent does the current pre-16 vocational offer equip pupils with the necessary knowledge and skills and prepare them for further study options, including 16-19 technical pathways and/or A levels? Could the pre-16 vocational offer be improved?

vocational offer - equip for further study and improvement suggestions:

## Section 7: Assessment and accountability

35 Is the volume of statutory assessment at key stage 1 and 2 right for the purposes set out above?

volume of assessment at key stage 1 and 2:

Statutory assessment at key stages 1 and 2 have incrementally contributed to the culture of high-stakes, test-based accountability that has now been prevalent, defining feature in the education landscape for many years.

NGA's view, based on longitudinal AGS survey data, continual anecdotal feedback from members and NGA's 2024 snap survey reveals this has impacted negatively on primary education, the freedoms to refine and enhance curriculum design and delivery, and the ability to meaningfully invest in a curriculum offer that can be contextually developed alongside community needs and pressures.

NGA's view is that assessments should inform and prepare children more effectively for the next phase of their education, and the wider world. But this should only be exercised in accordance with a thorough examination of the detrimental impact of any form of primary testing on children. These tools to date, particularly Key stage 2 assessments, have been used as a blunt tool for measurement against governmental targets, and has not put the needs of children at the forefront of both design and implementation of assessment.

NGA's view is the government needs to consider a more holistic, intelligent form of accountability and performance measures, that doesn't target attainment at the expense of learning experience, and lifelong potential.

36 Are there any changes that could be made to improve efficacy without having a negative impact on pupils' learning or the wider education system?

key stage 1 and 2 assessment improvements:

Recognising and utilising the governing board's role in overseeing changes and reforms to the curriculum is essential to ensuring it remains focused on providing the best possible outcomes for pupils while aligning with the school or trust's strategic vision. Governing boards play a pivotal role in ensuring that education policy set by the government is understood and enacted in a way that reflects the specific needs of the school community, while maintaining compliance and accountability.

By taking a strategic approach, governing boards ensure that curriculum reforms are implemented thoughtfully, with a focus on their intent, design, and impact, rather than the operational details of delivery. By equipping governors and trustees with training to interpret curriculum frameworks, the government will help establish an even greater understanding of how these translate into improved outcomes for pupils, empowering boards to make strategic decisions without becoming operational.

A key function of the governing board is stakeholder engagement. Engaging pupils, parents, staff and the wider community ensures the curriculum reflects local and global contexts and addresses diverse needs. Using structured mechanisms such as surveys or focus groups to gather input and review feedback will ensure the curriculum is relevant and inclusive without imposing additional burdens on teaching staff or diverting from core learning aims.

Governing boards will also play a key role in monitoring the implementation and impact of changes. Regular evaluation ensures curriculum changes benefit pupils without creating unintended negative effects.

By recognising and prioritising the role of governance in the curriculum review process, policy reforms set by the government can be implemented seamlessly, supporting the school's vision, addressing the needs of all pupils, and enhancing learning without causing inefficiencies or disruptions to the broader education system.

37 Are there other changes to the statutory assessment system at key stages 1 and 2 that could be made to improve pupils' experience of assessment, without having a negative impact on either pupils' learning or the wider education system?

key stage 1 and 2 assessment improvements to experience:

Please refer to question 35.

38 What can we do to ensure the assessment system at key stages 1 and 2 works well for all learners, including learners in need of additional support in their education (for example SEND, disadvantage, EAL)?

key stage 1 and 2 assessment works for ALL learners:

## Section 7: Assessment and accountability

39 Is the volume of assessment required for GCSEs right for the purposes set out above? Are there any changes that could be made without having a negative impact on either pupils' learning or the wider education system?

volume of assessment at GCSEs:

40 What more can we do to ensure that: a) the assessment requirements for GCSEs capture and support the development of knowledge and skills of every young person; and b) young people's wellbeing is effectively considered when assessments are developed, giving pupils the best chance to show what they can do to support their progression?

GCSE assessments - support development of knowledge and skills and considers wellbeing:

NGA agrees that the current system needs reform to be more inclusive, supportive, and reflective of the skills needed by society for the future. Governing boards and policymakers have a vital role in driving this transformation, ensuring assessments serve all pupils effectively while establishing a culture of wellbeing and engagement.

A) Ensuring GCSE assessment captures knowledge and skills development for all:

In 2022, NGA held a series of working groups for governors and trustees from across the country. One of the dominant themes from the discussion was the need to ensure assessments recognise a broader spectrum of skills and learning beyond rote memorisation and high-pressure exam performance. As one participant highlighted, "The system serves both ends of the spectrum very badly... The 30% who are doomed to fail, and those at the other end who are not challenged or prepared for their next steps." This highlights a misalignment between assessment goals and student needs.

Suggestions from NGA and governors and trustees represented as part of this piece of work:

1. Broaden assessment modalities: Introduce mixed assessment models combining exams with portfolios, coursework, and project-based assessments. This was supported by examples of success with BTECs and coursework-heavy "mode three" assessments from past systems: "Practical, active learning that is relevant to their lives and communities is where many students flourish, but the focus on exams undermines this."
2. Move toward criterion-referenced systems: Replace norm-referenced grading with systems that assess whether students meet specific learning standards. A participant described the unfairness of the current norm-referenced approach: "The kind of grade you get is not down to how well you've done, but how well you've done in comparison to others."
3. Recognise diverse achievements: Implement assessments that measure essential skills like teamwork, problem-solving, and creativity. As one contributor argued: "These so-called 'soft skills' are fundamentally important and should be valued in assessments."

B) Supporting wellbeing through assessment development

The current exam-centric model creates significant pressure on young people, leading to disengagement and mental health concerns.

To better consider wellbeing:

1. Flexible timing and formats: Allow students to complete assessments over time or in different formats to accommodate individual circumstances. One participant noted, "We are measuring them on a single day and set of circumstances, regardless of what might have happened that morning or at home."
2. Reduce stakes of single assessments: Develop cumulative assessments that reflect a broader and ongoing picture of achievement. A participant reflected on the harm caused by the high stakes assessment system: "Children often know if they are going to fail before they even start, which is alienating and demotivating."
3. Embed mental health safeguards: Design assessment policies that actively consider the wellbeing of pupils, such as providing greater flexibility and reducing the pressure to compete. Another contributor said: "We need to change the language and discourse around exams to help children feel they can succeed."

41 Are there particular GCSE subjects where changes could be made to the qualification content and/or assessment that would be beneficial for pupils' learning?

changes to GCSE qualification content or assessment:

## Section 7: Assessment and accountability

42 Are there ways in which we could support improvement in pupil progress and outcomes at key stage 3?

support pupil progress and outcomes at key stage 3:

43 Are there ways in which we could support pupils who do not meet the expected standard at key stage 2?

support pupils who do not meet expected standard at key stage 2:

## Section 7: Assessment and accountability

44 To what extent, and in what ways, does the accountability system influence curriculum and assessment decisions in schools and colleges?

accountability system influence curriculum and assessment decisions:

Our AGS 2024 survey results revealed that Ofsted wields significant influence over school practices in England. Over half of the respondents (51%) identified Ofsted as the single biggest factor shaping practice within their school or trust. This finding highlights the profound impact of the inspection framework on system culture, day-to-day operations and strategic decisions made by school leaders and educators.

NGA has long held the view that the current high stakes accountability system significantly influences curriculum and assessment decisions in schools and colleges, often shaping them in ways that prioritise measurable outcomes over broader educational goals. This influence stems from the pressures placed on schools to perform well in league tables, meet government-mandated standards, and secure favourable Ofsted judgments.

- **Shaping priorities around accountability measures:** The accountability system, particularly through metrics like Progress 8 and attainment thresholds, drives schools to align their curriculum and assessment choices with what is measured, often at the expense of other valuable learning experiences. NGA has highlighted how schools frequently narrow their curriculum to prioritise subjects that contribute most directly to accountability frameworks, such as English, maths and EBacc subjects.
- **Impact on inclusion and equity:** The accountability system can marginalise students who may not perform well under traditional assessment models. NGA has raised concerns about how the focus on standardised outcomes excludes pupils with additional needs or those on alternative pathways, as these measures often fail to capture the full scope of a student's achievements or potential: Quote from roundtable discussion: "The system often leaves disadvantaged students feeling like failures due to the high-stakes nature of exams, which are poorly aligned with their individual strengths and needs."
- **Effects on teacher workload and wellbeing:** The focus on accountability also heavily influences the internal practices of schools, with teachers and leaders investing significant time in preparing students for exams. NGA has highlighted how this workload impacts teacher retention and wellbeing, which indirectly affects curriculum breadth and quality. NGA Insight: NGA's work on teacher workload stresses the need for accountability reform that alleviates excessive pressure and allows teachers to focus on broader educational goals.

Balancing accountability with purposeful education:

NGA has consistently called for a shift in the accountability system to better align with the needs of pupils and schools. This includes:

- Reducing the high stakes of standardised testing.
- Broadening the metrics used to assess school performance, including measures of pupil wellbeing and engagement.
- Encouraging a focus on long-term outcomes, such as readiness for life and work, rather than short-term performance metrics.

By realigning the accountability system with these principles, NGA argues that schools and colleges can regain the freedom to make curriculum and assessment decisions based on what is best for their pupils rather than external pressures. This aligns with NGA's overarching commitment to promoting governance that prioritises educational equity and the holistic development of all students.

45 How well does the current accountability system support and recognise progress for all pupils and learners? What works well and what could be improved?

accountability system support and recognise progress for ALL pupils:

The current accountability system has concentrated too heavily on just two dimensions:

- inspection
- published measures of pupil outcomes.

This narrow focus creates significant limitations in how effectively we can support and recognise progress for all pupils. In most recent times, only one dimension of accountability has dominated the 'high stakes' debate: Ofsted. Government, and indeed wider society, has reached a point where it is attempting to judge such a complex and important public service through a very limited lens, insufficient in its ability to build a holistic view, and therefore proactive in some circumstances in damaging the identification process of what improvement is needed.

The system generates widespread fear and anxiety among school leaders, creating a culture that has become deeply entrenched. This culture affects decision-making at all levels, where even governors and trustees from outside the schools sector quickly becoming indoctrinated into this mindset. NGA's view is therefore that the current approach to accountability, against a truly ambitious vision for the curriculum and learning experience of children and young people, can actually work against genuine improvement by creating perverse incentives and encouraging defensive behaviours rather than open, collaborative approaches to curriculum and assessment review and development.

However, there are elements of the current system that work well when properly supported. Governing boards provide continuous, incremental, responsive rather than snapshot accountability and offer deep understanding of local context and stakeholder needs. When functioning effectively as a respected and utilised part of a wider accountability system, boards can balance need and success with support and challenge, providing responsive oversight that genuinely contributes to school improvement. Professional accountability among school leaders, particularly through peer networks and effective line management, can also drive positive change.

To create a more effective system, we need to move toward a more intelligent form of accountability. This means developing an approach that measures what we truly value – including curriculum purpose, breadth, design and implementation, rather than simply valuing what we can measure easily. We

need better mechanisms for capturing both quantitative and qualitative data, including stakeholder voice, while ensuring that data serves rather than drives accountability.

The system requires significant rebalancing to reduce the overwhelming focus on inspection and create better harmony between different forms of accountability, placing the responsive accountability of governance at the heart of that system. This should include greater acknowledgement and central interest and investment in governance, from training and support to more coverage, to better systems for sharing best practice, and more emphasis on improvement rather than judgment. The accountability system should serve a stakeholder-first approach rather than a political-first approach, focusing on how well schools serve their local communities' needs.

46 Should there be any changes to the current accountability system in order to better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and/or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds? If so, what should those changes be?

accountability system changes to support SEND or socio-economically disadvantaged:

Yes, significant changes are needed to better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The correlation between deprivation and lower Ofsted grades raises crucial questions about whether this represents a failure of the accountability system or accurately identifies genuine challenges. While schools with high levels of SEND face significant operational challenges, particularly around resources, adequate curriculum accessibility and staff recruitment and retention, the current accountability framework doesn't adequately account for these contextual factors.

The government should look at how it strengthens the role of governing boards in monitoring inclusion and progress, through the facilitation of better data and tools for boards to track outcomes for different pupil groups and enabling boards to hold leaders to account effectively for inclusive practice.

The system should develop more sophisticated progress measures that account for context and create better ways to recognise non-academic progress. This includes ensuring accountability measures don't disincentivise inclusion and providing clearer accountability for the use of targeted funding and resources for SEND provision.

We support the introduction of school report cards as part of this reform, provided they are developed thoughtfully and include specific metrics for SEND and disadvantaged pupils while allowing for local contextualised assessment and support.

The path to better accountability lies not in tweaking inspection frameworks but in building a system that truly serves children and communities with all forms of need, and fundamentally responds to their needs. This means empowering organisational and locally driven governance, focusing on meaningful outcomes for each school community, and creating mechanisms that support rather than substitute for local accountability. Indeed, NGA's view is that current focus on inclusion is misplaced, and that attempting to simply build a narrative and system around ensuring children with specific needs can be included indicates that the system is currently geared towards the majority, with others then factored in. The curriculum review and accountability review coinciding is a major opportunity to ensure the a system, and curriculum design of true belonging for all can be prioritised.

## Section 8: Qualification pathways 16-19

47 To what extent does the range of programmes and qualifications on offer at each level meet the needs and aspirations of learners? a) Level 3 b) Level 2 c) Level 1 and entry level

extent to which programmes and qualifications meet needs and aspirations of learners:

48 Are there particular changes that could be made to the following programmes and qualifications, and/or their assessment that would be beneficial to learners: a) AS/A level qualifications b) T Level and T Level Foundation Year programmes c) Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 3 d) Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 2 and below

changes to programmes and qualifications:

49 How can we improve learners' understanding of how the different programmes and qualifications on offer will prepare them for university, employment (including apprenticeships) and/or further technical study?

improve understanding on how programmes and qualifications will prepare them for future:

50 To what extent is there enough scope and flexibility in the system to support learners who may need to change course?

scope and flexibility to support learners changing course:

51 Are there additional skills, subjects, or experiences that all learners should develop or study during 16-19 education, regardless of their chosen programmes and qualifications, to support them to be prepared for life and work?

skills, subjects or experiences that all learners should develop or study during 16-19:

## Section 9: Other issues on which we would welcome views

52 How can the curriculum, assessment and wraparound support better enable transitions between key stages to ensure continuous learning and support attainment?

wraparound support enabling transitions between key stages:

## Section 9: Other issues on which we would welcome views

53 How could technology be used to improve how we deliver the curriculum, assessment and qualifications in England?

how can technology be used to improve delivery of curriculum, assessment and qualifications :

The rapid advancement of technology, particularly artificial intelligence, presents both significant opportunities and challenges for schools in delivering curriculum, assessment and qualifications. From the perspective of both curriculum and assessment, the key is ensuring these tools enhance rather than drive educational outcomes, while maintaining appropriate safeguards and equity of access.

Governing boards have a crucial strategic role in overseeing how technology is implemented in their schools and trusts. In order to ensure that schools and trusts are not being swept along by the latest innovations, the Department needs to drive a leadership and governance agenda that ensures technology adoption is purposeful, in line with ambitious, strategic decision making, and aligned with their school's vision and values. This requires robust policies that protect student data and outline ethical usage of AI and tech within the classroom environment, while providing frameworks that enable innovation practiced safely.

As stewards of school resources, boards must also make informed decisions about technology investments, ensuring both value for money and equitable access across their school community. The speed of technological advancement means there will be no pressures on schools to initially invest in a large field of offerings, with no upfront efficiencies. It is easy to foresee a wild west mentality of test and see, possibly to the detriment to the curriculum budget. The government should look to facilitate collaborative sector learning, that protects against profit focused corporate entities that have no interest in the improvement of public services.

The potential for technology to enhance curriculum delivery is significant and one that should be approached robustly, but with caution. Through proper governance oversight, technology can be harnessed to support diverse learning needs, provide materials in different languages or formats, and ensure genuine inclusion rather than creating new barriers. Boards should be looking at how technology can support quality assurance of curriculum delivery, enabling better monitoring of coverage and effectiveness, while gathering meaningful data about student engagement and progress to support evidence-based decision making.

In assessment, technology offers opportunities to revolutionise traditional approaches while maintaining necessary rigor and fairness. It will however be down to governing boards to consider how technology can support more immediate, formative assessment that enables personalised learning journeys and reduces teacher workload in assessment administration.

The ability to analyse assessment data more quickly and effectively can support early identification of learning gaps and enable more responsive curriculum adjustment. However, the remit of this curriculum review should consider that boards must ensure that assessment technology serves educational goals rather than constraining teaching and learning approaches.

NGA's view is that, crucially, any implementation of technology must maintain a human-first approach. AI cannot replace the essential human elements of education, and it must not be allowed to place a threat over a profession that is already under pressure. AI and tech can and should be used to make the profession more attractive and sustainable, but it cannot have heartfelt conversations with school leaders or engage in courageous discussions around the board table. The role of technology should be to create more capacity for these vital human interactions, and to facilitate genuine, informed and considered curriculum enhancement, by reducing administrative burden and streamlining processes.

Equity and access must be at the forefront of all considerations around how technology can aid the progress of curriculum and assessment. Boards need to ensure all students can benefit from technology implementations, and so the government must recognise this as an additional pressure, helping to address issues of digital poverty and access. This includes supporting staff development to use technology effectively and ensuring adequate technical infrastructure is in place.

Implementation should take a staged approach, starting with small-scale pilots that can be properly evaluated before wider rollout. Boards should ensure clear success criteria are in place and regular review mechanisms are established. Meaningful stakeholder engagement is essential - consulting with staff, students, and parents about technology implementation, collecting and responding to feedback, and maintaining clear communication about technology's role and purpose.

Looking to the future, the government should equip schools and trusts to stay informed about technological developments while considering long-term sustainability. This includes planning for future technology needs, ensuring different systems can work together effectively, and maintaining strong ethical oversight of new technologies, particularly around pupil privacy and data protection.

The current rapid advancement of AI technology makes it particularly crucial that boards take an active role in its governance. While AI offers exciting possibilities for personalising learning, streamlining assessment, and reducing staff workload, it must be implemented thoughtfully and ethically.

Technology, particularly AI, has the potential to significantly enhance how we deliver curriculum, assessment and qualifications in England. However, this potential can only be realised through careful governance that ensures technology serves educational goals rather than driving them.

## Section 9: Other issues on which we would welcome views

54 Do you have any further views on anything else associated with the Curriculum and Assessment Review not covered in the questions throughout the call for evidence?

Any further views:

Since the inception of NGA's Greener Governance campaign in 2021, we have committed to gather quantitative data on governors and trustees' progress and stances on environmental sustainability. These allow us to ground our suggestions into this consultation on a solid data-informed basis. Annual Governance Survey data:

- In 2022, 70% of respondents said that their school/trust teaches what is required by the national curriculum on environmental sustainability, this figure dropped to 30% for those who said their school or trust went beyond what is required of the national curriculum. Inclusion in the national curriculum would therefore positively increase the number of children exposed to content on environmental sustainability.

- In 2022, 83% of respondents who govern in nursery schools report that environmental sustainability is included in their curriculum offer, 78% for primary, and 68% in Secondary. Changes to the curriculum therefore should create a consistent stream of environmental sustainability content that flows through all key stages equally.

The ability to implement the new curriculum needs thought. Any changes to the curriculum should be supported by staff feeling able and confident to deliver it. As such, training (during teacher training, NPQ's and continued CPD) should empower staff to successfully implement new content.