



**Qualifications
and Curriculum
Development
Agency**

Level descriptions for subjects

*A report on the outcomes of the public consultation under Section 96 of
the Education Act 2002*

September 2009

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Background to the consultation

In all national curriculum subjects, the criteria for assessing learners' progress are set out in descriptions of performance at nine levels for each attainment target (levels 1 to 8 and 'exceptional performance'). These national standards, established in their current form in 1995, allow children, as well as their teachers, parents, carers or guardians, to see how well they are doing in relation to their prior attainment and expectations for children of their age.

When the secondary curriculum was reviewed and subsequently implemented from September 2008, some amendments were proposed to the level descriptions from level 4 to exceptional performance to reflect changes to the programmes of study. These revised level descriptions are due to be used statutorily for the first time in summer 2011, when the first cohort of pupils to complete key stage 3 under the new curriculum arrangements will be assessed at the end of year 9.

A small but significant minority of pupils at key stage 3, including many who have special educational needs, will be achieving at levels below level 4, so it is important that these level descriptions are also reviewed. This will ensure that a full set of revised level descriptions are available for subject specialist secondary teachers who may have pupils working at levels 1 to 3 and need to make end of key stage 3 judgements about their performance in national curriculum subjects.

During the course of the primary review there has also been an opportunity to consider the previous revisions and to revise the lower levels to make them compatible with the relevant aspects of the secondary and proposed new primary curriculum.

The Secretary of State asked QCDA, under the authority of Section 96 of the Education Act 2002, to carry out a public consultation on these proposed revisions to level descriptions and to report on the outcomes alongside QCDA's recommendations as to the proposals. A consultation survey was designed by QCDA. The consultation was open between 30 April and 24 July 2009 and Ipsos MORI was commissioned to process the subsequent data. A range of conferences, focus groups and engagement events was also organised during this period. This report contains the outcomes of the public consultation.

Executive summary

In all subjects except modern foreign languages (MFL) there was broad support for the proposed changes to the level descriptions, and broad agreement that they maintain standards and provide appropriate progression. In physical education, although just over half of respondents to the online survey disagreed with the proposed changes, the numbers were very small (13 respondents in total) and other consultation feedback did not replicate this concern.

There was some agreement across all level descriptions that the proposed changes align level descriptions with the proposed primary curriculum. However, some primary respondents questioned why level descriptions continue to be organised by subject.

The proposed changes for citizenship received broad support, and there was general agreement that descriptions more clearly articulate standards for the subject. Some concerns were raised about the perceived narrowness of the lower levels.

The proposed changes to information and communication technology (ICT) received broad support, and there was general agreement that the revisions reflect raised expectations in the primary curriculum.

The proposed changes to MFL received some support. However, the majority of respondents did not support the merging of existing attainment targets and the introduction of a new attainment target for intercultural understanding.

The science and mathematics responses indicated that the level descriptions could be improved by including references to applied and practical aspects of these subjects.

Composition of the responses

This report is based on the following evidence:

- 499 responses to the survey:
 - 41 for citizenship
 - 36 for English
 - 28 for ICT
 - 41 for mathematics
 - 212 for MFL
 - 37 for religious education
 - 104 spread across the remaining seven subjects
- a launch conference on 13 May for 160 delegates who discussed the level descriptions for subjects as well as other topics
- 307 delegates at twenty-five focus group meetings involving interest groups such as professional associations, unions, local authority advisers and providers of initial teacher education
- four MFL focus groups, consisting of key players from the Office for standards in education (Ofsted), the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), the Association for Language Learning (ALL), the National Association of Language Advisers (NALA), the Centre for Information on Language Teaching (CILT), Links into Languages, secondary teachers and primary teachers and advisers convened specifically to discuss the proposals for level descriptions
- five citizenship focus groups, consisting of key players from the subject association and secondary and primary teachers, convened specifically to discuss the proposals for level descriptions
- four ICT focus groups, consisting of key players from NAACE (a key subject association for ICT) and secondary and primary teachers, convened specifically to discuss the proposals for level descriptions
- emails received and verbal comments made at a variety of meetings attended by QCDA subject advisers as part of their work.

Consultation format

A series of statements was developed about the proposed level descriptions for each subject. Respondents were asked about the strength of their agreement with each of the following statements:

1. *The proposed level descriptions maintain standards.*
2. *The proposed level descriptions provide appropriate progression.*
3. *The expectations in the level descriptions are appropriate for children.*
4. *The proposed level descriptions are an appropriate basis for national curriculum assessment requirements of relevant aspects of the proposed new primary curriculum.*
5. *The proposed level descriptions are an appropriate basis for assessment of secondary national curriculum subjects.*
6. *The level descriptions can be used and applied to assess children's work.*

This report considers the overall findings from the consultation, and then considers responses to each of the individual subject level descriptions in turn.

1. Overall

From the consultation survey

Overall, with the exception of the responses for MFL and PE, the majority of online responses agreed or strongly agreed with the proposals.

The least positive responses overall were for statement 4 (*The proposed level descriptions are an appropriate basis for national curriculum assessment requirements of relevant aspects of the proposed new primary curriculum*) and statement 5 (*The proposed level descriptions are an appropriate basis for assessment of secondary national curriculum subjects*). For statements 4 and 5, the number of respondents who agreed exceeded the number who disagreed in 9 of the 13 subjects.

For English, ICT, mathematics and science, responses were generally in greater agreement than across all other subjects.

For MFL, most respondents disagreed with the statements. For example, twenty-three per cent said that the level descriptions were appropriate for assessment of secondary MFL, and 17 per cent agreed that the level descriptions would be appropriate for assessment in the primary phase.

For PE, there was a mixed response, with rather more respondents who disagreed than those who agreed with the statements. There were 13 respondents.

From the consultation survey free text responses

Many comments related to issues or questions outside the consultation, including the relationship between the level descriptions and the assessment guidelines developed for Assessing Pupils' Progress, expected levels of attainment and the presence or absence of specific content.

The largest number of free text responses was received for MFL. There was overall disagreement with the proposal to merge current attainment targets 1 to 4 into two attainment targets and with the proposal to introduce a new attainment target called 'Intercultural understanding'. Several respondents commented that the development of intercultural understanding could be addressed by many subjects in the curriculum and questioned whether it would be possible to assess this using a range of level descriptions.

From the launch conference

During conference voting activities, of the delegates who felt able to comment on the level descriptions proposals, an average of 65 per cent supported the proposals, with the highest level of agreement for the statement that the level descriptions provide appropriate progression (77 per cent). Forty-eight per cent supported the statement that the proposed level descriptions are an appropriate basis for assessment of relevant aspects of the proposed new primary curriculum.

From focus groups and individual written submissions

Most discussion about the level descriptions in the focus groups centred on statements 4 and 5. Respondents questioned why, for the proposed primary curriculum, the level descriptions did not reflect the areas of learning. They expressed concern that this would reduce the impact of the new curriculum.

2. Subject-specific comments

The following subject-specific sections summarise responses made at focus group meetings and at other organised events, and responses made directly to QCDA in written submissions. In view of the extent of proposed changes, focus groups were convened to consider proposals for citizenship, ICT and MFL. Responses from other focus groups relating to mathematics and science are also summarised below. For all other subjects there were very few responses, so these subjects are not considered individually.

Citizenship

Most respondents agreed that the proposed level descriptions have improved progression and clarity of expectations regarding range and content. Some respondents felt that the key concepts in the programme of study could be reflected more clearly in the level descriptions. There was some concern that the lower levels may not reflect attainment across the full breadth of the subject.

ICT

Most respondents agreed with the proposals for revised level descriptions. They agreed that the revised level descriptions reflect raised expectations for ICT in the primary curriculum, maintain standards, and provide appropriate progression. Some respondents said that the revised description for level 3 was too demanding.

Mathematics

There was support for the proposed revisions to level descriptions. Some specific minor rewordings were suggested. Some respondents felt that aspects of the level descriptions for mathematics needed to be reconsidered to reflect better the notion of 'early, middle, later' in the proposed primary curriculum. There was concern that one or two statements in particular needed to change level to match the primary curriculum proposals for the middle stage.

MFL

The majority of respondents did not agree with the proposal to combine the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing into two attainment targets. There was concern that it would be difficult to assess pupils who achieve different levels in each of the skills, and that teachers would have to assess each skill separately in any case. Concern was also expressed about the lack of cohesion between the proposed level descriptions, the Languages Ladder and GCSE grade descriptions.

There was some support for the proposal to introduce a new attainment target for intercultural understanding. Respondents recognised that the subject offered a particularly strong context in which to consider similarities and differences between cultures and how they interrelate. However, respondents generally disagreed with the proposed level descriptions for intercultural understanding. It was argued that intercultural understanding is developed through many areas of the curriculum and that it would be inappropriate to give the impression that it is associated uniquely with MFL. Doubt was expressed about the feasibility of assessing intercultural understanding using a system of levels and about how assessment could be reliably standardised across schools. Concerns also focused on whether assessing intercultural understanding might lead to an overemphasis on the use of English within modern language teaching and the temptation to report increased subject attainment by over-generous assessment of this attainment target. There was also no consensus on how progression could be described. Most respondents felt that any changes – should there be any – should not be introduced before 2012.

Science

Most respondents were supportive of the proposals. Some said that the proposed level descriptions have not changed sufficiently to match the proposed primary curriculum. In particular, they felt that the proposed level descriptions are not sufficiently matched to the active stems of the statements in the programme of learning for scientific and technological understanding such as 'apply knowledge and understanding to...' and 'use a variety of methods to...'. It was therefore felt that they do not describe the expected standards clearly enough in terms of how, as opposed to what, children will be learning.

3. Conclusions

The proposed level descriptions in the consultation were broadly supported. This includes subjects such as citizenship and ICT where there had been more extensive changes from the 2008 proposals.

In response to the consultation the following amendments are therefore proposed:

- For five subjects (art and design, Design and technology, history, PE and RE) no amendments are proposed to the consultation versions.
- For seven subjects (English, citizenship, geography, ICT, mathematics, music and science) very minor amendments are proposed to the consultation versions.

- For MFL it is recommended that the 2007 post consultation version of the attainment targets and level descriptions should be retained.

Appendix 1: Consultation statistics

These are the results from the level descriptions survey.

All questions were optional, so the base for each question varies depending on the number of people who responded. Where results do not add up to 100, this may be due to multiple responses or computer rounding.

For all level descriptions except those for MFL, fewer than 100 people commented. Therefore, findings for all level descriptions are presented in whole numbers, apart from findings for MFL where findings are given as percentages.

Q1 **The proposed level descriptions from level 1 to exceptional performance maintain standards.**

Base: All answering	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure
	N	N	N	N	N
Art and design (8)	2	4	1	1	–
Citizenship (41)	10	15	5	8	3
Design and technology (13)	3	7	1	2	–
English (36)	13	12	4	5	2
Geography (9)	4	3	1	1	–
History (20)	4	8	2	4	2
ICT (28)	12	11	2	2	1
Mathematics (40)	11	21	3	5	–
Music (16)	4	7	3	1	1
PE (13)	2	4	5	2	–
RE (37)	8	14	3	9	3
Science (23)	4	10	3	3	3
	%	%	%	%	%
MFL (211)	12	23	18	43	4

Q2 **The proposed level descriptions from level 1 to exceptional performance provide appropriate progression.**

Base: All answering	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure
	N	N	N	N	N
Art and design (9)	2	5	1	1	–
Citizenship (39)	6	18	5	8	2
Design and technology (13)	3	7	2	1	–
English (36)	11	15	3	4	3
Geography (9)	3	4	1	1	–
History (19)	5	7	4	3	–
ICT (27)	9	12	3	2	1
Mathematics (40)	10	16	7	5	2
Music (16)	3	7	5	1	–
PE (13)	2	3	5	2	1
RE (37)	7	12	6	9	3
Science (23)	5	11	1	3	3
	%	%	%	%	%
MFL (211)	9	27	18	44	3

Q3 **The expectations set out in the proposed level descriptions from level 1 to exceptional performance are appropriate for children.**

Base: All answering	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure
	N	N	N	N	N
Art and design (8)	1	5	1	1	–
Citizenship (41)	6	16	6	8	5
Design and technology (12)	2	6	3	1	–
English (35)	12	14	4	3	2
Geography (9)	3	3	1	1	1
History (20)	6	6	3	3	2
ICT (27)	9	11	4	2	1
Mathematics (39)	9	18	4	5	3
Music (16)	2	9	3	2	–
PE (13)	1	4	5	3	–
RE (37)	5	13	7	10	2
Science (21)	5	9	1	3	3
	%	%	%	%	%
MFL (211)	5	26	19	49	1

Q4 **The proposed level descriptions are an appropriate basis for national curriculum assessment requirements of relevant aspects of the proposed new primary curriculum.**

Base: All answering	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure
	N	N	N	N	N
Art and design (9)	–	4	4	1	–
Citizenship (39)	4	13	4	9	9
Design and technology (12)	–	5	1	2	4
English (36)	6	19	2	6	3
Geography (9)	2	3	2	1	1
History (19)	4	6	3	3	3
ICT (26)	8	11	3	2	2
Mathematics (41)	6	19	6	5	5
Music (16)	1	7	4	2	2
PE (13)	–	4	6	2	1
RE (37)	4	10	7	9	7
Science (23)	3	11	2	3	4
	%	%	%	%	%
MFL (209)	4	13	18	42	22

Q5 **The proposed level descriptions are an appropriate basis for assessment of secondary national curriculum subjects.**

Base: All answering	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure
	N	N	N	N	N
Art and design (9)	1	5	2	1	–
Citizenship (37)	5	15	5	8	4
Design and technology (14)	1	10	–	2	1
English (35)	6	12	3	4	10
Geography (8)	2	2	2	1	1
History (18)	3	4	4	4	3
ICT (24)	4	8	2	3	7
Mathematics (38)	6	11	5	7	9
Music (16)	2	5	3	3	3
PE (12)	1	3	6	2	–
RE (37)	4	12	7	10	4
Science (23)	3	8	1	4	7
	%	%	%	%	%
MFL (209)	6	17	17	58	2

Q6 **The proposed level descriptions from levels 1 to exceptional performance can be used and applied to assess children's work.**

Base: All answering	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure
	N	N	N	N	N
Art and design (8)	1	4	2	1	–
Citizenship (41)	3	19	6	9	4
Design and technology (12)	–	9	–	3	–
English (35)	7	20	2	5	1
Geography (9)	2	4	2	1	–
History (19)	3	6	5	3	2
ICT (26)	9	12	2	2	1
Mathematics (41)	5	21	5	5	5
Music (16)	1	9	3	2	1
PE (13)	–	4	7	2	–
RE (37)	7	12	4	12	2
Science (23)	3	13	–	3	4
	%	%	%	%	%
MFL (212)	6	19	19	54	2