



BRIEFING PAPER

Number CBP 07980, 8 January 2020

Assessment and testing in primary education (England)

By Nerys Roberts

Inside:

1. What assessments do primary-aged children take part in?
2. Historical background: primary assessment



Contents

Summary	3
1. What assessments do primary-aged children take part in?	4
1.1 National curriculum tests, or SATs	5
Legislative basis for SATs and other assessments	5
What rules do schools have to follow in administering SATs and other statutory assessments?	5
Duty to ensure assessments and tests are administered	5
Pupils absent during SATs	5
1.2 New assessments for primary phase schools	6
Times table check in year four from 2019-20	6
A new statutory baseline assessment from September 2020	6
1.3 Special educational needs, SATs and other statutory assessments	7
1.4 How are SATs results used for school accountability purposes?	8
1.5 Headline measures in 2019 primary school performance tables	9
1.6 Finding school performance data	9
2. Historical background: primary assessment	10
2.1 SATs reform – timeline of key developments since 2010	10

Summary

SATs, or national curriculum assessments

SATs, or national curriculum assessments, are assessments of primary pupils' progress and attainment. They are currently taken at the end of key stage 1 (infant phase) and key stage 2 (end of primary/ junior phase).

At key stage 2, the tests are more formal and school-level results are published in national performance tables allowing for comparison with other schools. These are often known as league tables.

SATs cover core academic subjects – English, maths and science.

Phonics screening check

Children in year one, which is usually the second year of primary education, also take a phonics screen to check their ability to decode words. They complete the screen again in year two if they don't reach the expected standard in year one.

New times table check in year four from 2019-20

In the 2019-20 academic year, all qualifying schools will administer an online multiplication tables check for children in year four (normally aged 8 or 9). This will test recall of times tables up to 12. Schools had the option of taking part in a voluntary pilot phase, during the summer term of the 2018-19 academic year.

A new statutory baseline assessment in reception class: September 2020

The 2017 Government said that, from September 2020, children in all qualifying schools would take a new baseline assessment within the first six weeks of entering reception class. This will focus on maths, and literacy, communication and development. The results will be used as the starting point to assess how much progress schools are making with their pupils. Results for individual children or schools will not be published.

In parallel, the 2017 Government said it intended to make key stage 1 statutory national curriculum assessments (SATs) non-statutory once the baseline assessment was established.

1. What assessments do primary-aged children take part in?

The table below shows current and planned assessments and tests that are undertaken in state-funded primary phase schools in England.

Tests and assessments in primary education England		
When?	What?	How results published
Within the first six weeks of reception entry (from September 2020)	Assesses development in mathematics, literacy, communication and development	Results not published and used only to calculate KS2 progress performance measures for schools.
Reception class (age 4 or 5)	Early Years Foundation Stage Profile	Reported at local authority (LA) level
Year 1 (age 5 or 6)	Phonics screening check (a test of reading ability)	Reported at LA level
Year 2 (age 6 or 7) - end of key stage 1	KS1 national curriculum assessments (SATs) in: maths, English reading and writing, and science	Reported at LA level
Year 4 (age 8 or 9) (from 2019-20)	Multiplication tables check	Reported at LA level
Year 6 (age 10 or 11), end of key stage 2	National curriculum assessments in: maths; English reading and writing; grammar, punctuation and spelling; science sampling test every other year.	Many results published at school level

1.1 National curriculum tests, or SATs

All maintained schools are required to participate in national curriculum assessments; these are often known as SATs.

Primary-phase academies and free schools will normally have clauses in their funding agreements requiring participation in assessments. There are different arrangements for some pupils in non-mainstream settings, such as hospital schools.

Legislative basis for SATs and other assessments

The following primary and secondary legislation provides the statutory framework for national curriculum assessments in maintained schools:

- The *Education (National Curriculum) (Key Stage 1 Assessment Arrangements) (England) Order 2004*, as amended.
- The *Education (National Curriculum) (Key Stage 2 Assessment Arrangements) (England) Order 2003*, as amended.

The Orders are made under section 87 of the *Education Act 2002*, as amended.

What rules do schools have to follow in administering SATs and other assessments?

The Standards and Testing Agency (STA) publishes statutory guidance on the arrangements for reception, key stage 1 and key stage 2 assessment in 2019 and 2020:

- STA, [2019](#) and [2020](#) early years foundation stage: assessment and reporting arrangements (ARA).
- STA, [2019](#) and [2020](#) key stage 1 ARA.
- STA, [2019](#) and [2020](#) key stage 2 ARA.

Duty to ensure assessments and tests are administered

Maintained school head teachers are under a duty to ensure that eligible pupils undertake national curriculum and other statutory assessments, in line with any published assessment and reporting arrangements. For academies, the duty is enforced through the academy trust's funding agreement if, as is usual, it contains clauses requiring this.

There's no parallel statutory duty on parents to ensure that their children participate in tests and assessments, but they are required by law to ensure that their children attend school regularly.

Pupils absent during SATs

Key stage 1 assessments can be taken at any point during May. They aren't strictly timed. If a child is temporarily absent because of illness or for another reason, they would usually be able to complete the assessments when they return to school.

At key stage 2, there is a national timetable for the tests to ensure they're taken on the same days in all schools. For 2020, if a pupil is

Maintained schools and academies

Both types of state funded school, but academies are independent of the local authority.

absent, for example because of illness, on the day of a test, but returns to school within 5 school days, the school may be able to apply to the STA to let the child sit the test(s) late. This is known as a timetable variation.

Timetable variations aren't available if the absence was unauthorised (e.g., for a family holiday not approved by the school), the child has had access to the test materials, or has not been kept apart from classmates who have already taken the tests.

1.2 New assessments for primary phase schools

Times tables check in year four from 2019-20

In the 2019-20 academic year, all qualifying schools will administer an online multiplication tables check to children in year four (normally aged 8 or 9). This will test recall of times tables up to 12. Schools had the option of taking part in a voluntary pilot phase, during the summer term of the 2018-19 academic year.

A new statutory baseline assessment from September 2020

In the 2020-21 academic year, the DfE intends that children in qualifying schools will take part in a new baseline assessment within the first six weeks of starting school. This will focus on maths, and literacy, communication and development. The results will be used as the starting point to see how much progress schools are making with their pupils, over time. Results for individual children or schools will not be published. There will be a large-scale pilot of the baseline assessment in the 2019-20 academic year.

The DfE trialled three previous baseline assessments in 2015, but concluded that the available assessments were not sufficiently comparable to be used as a fair starting point for measuring pupils' progress for school accountability purposes. The new baseline assessment is being developed by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

The introduction of a reception baseline assessment has been controversial, with many early years educators expressing the view that it is inappropriate for children to be assessed at the very beginning of their school careers. The [More than a score](#) coalition argues that baseline assessment will be "pointless and damaging" and that the results will "inevitably be unreliable". They argue that baseline assessment has little predictive value in terms of children's later outcomes, and also that the assessments may interfere with children settling into school.¹

The Government says the baseline will act to give schools credit for the progress they make with pupils between reception and year two.

¹ More than a score petition, '[Four year olds don't need exams](#)', undated.

Currently, KS1 SATs results are used as the starting point for calculating progress measures.

Special educational needs, SATs and other statutory assessments

Adjustments to enable pupils to participate in national curriculum and other statutory assessments are known as access arrangements. These might include allowing additional time in tests, readers, scribes, use of technical aids such as word processors, or papers in different formats. For some types of changes, the school must apply to, or notify, the STA in advance.

In 2017, the Department for Education held a consultation on assessment arrangements for children with special educational needs:

- [Link to DfE/ STA consultation on implementing the Rochford Review](#)

This followed a review chaired by Diane Rochford, to advise on assessing the progress and attainment of children working below the level of the national curriculum tests.

The consultation asked for views on implementing the Rochford Review's recommendations, which included:

- Removing statutory assessment using the current P-scales for pupils engaged in subject-specific learning.
- Interim pre-key stage standards should be made permanent and used to assess all pupils working below the level of the national curriculum but who are engaged in subject-specific learning.
- Assessment of those not engaged in subject-specific learning should focus on seven aspects of cognition and learning:
 - Responsiveness;
 - Curiosity;
 - Discovery;
 - Anticipation;
 - Persistence;
 - Initiation;
 - Investigation.

P scales:

Attainment descriptors or targets to assess the attainment and progress of children working below the standard of the national curriculum tests and who aren't yet undertaking subject-specific learning.

The DfE published its [response to the consultation](#) on 14 September 2017. This confirmed the plans, including that the requirement to assess pupils engaged in subject-specific learning using P scales would be removed, and the interim pre-key stage standards would be made permanent, from the 2018-19 academic year.²

In November 2018, the Department for Education [announced](#) that pupils with complex special educational needs would be assessed using an 'aspects of engagement' approach from 2020. The new assessment, the announcement said, would be based on the seven aspects outlined

² DfE, [Primary school pupil assessment: Rochford Review recommendations, 14 September 2017](#).

above, and would be refined by an expert group, led by Diane Rochford, based on findings of a [pilot](#) completed by the DfE in 2018.³

1.3 How are SATs results used for school accountability purposes?

National curriculum assessments are one of the means through which the DfE holds schools accountable for their performance. Further background information on the relationship between SATs and school accountability be found in the following document:

- Department for Education, [Primary school accountability in 2019](#), September 2019.

Schools' inspectorate, Ofsted, introduced a new [education inspection framework](#) (EIF) in September 2019. This is intended to have a greater focus on curriculum breadth and depth, and less focus on internally-generated school performance data.

Introducing the new framework, Ofsted stressed that although performance data would continue to play a role in inspections, it would be a lesser one, and there would be more focus on the substance of education:

Over the years, there has been much debate about the use of performance data in inspection. Inspection has never been solely or primarily about data: inspectors' professional judgement has always been the determining factor. However, Ofsted accepts that developments in inspection have contributed to this imbalance in the accountability system. The main thrust of many typical inspection conversations has come to be about recent outcomes, assessment of current 'learners' progress' and expectations of future progress.

Our aim is to bring the inspection conversation back to the substance of education and training to treat providers as experts in their field and not as data managers, so that inspection complements rather than intensifies a focus on achievement and progress measures.

To this end, it is proposed that the new framework will no longer include the standalone 'outcomes' judgement. When reaching the quality of education judgement, inspectors will continue to consider the outcomes that learners achieve, using valid, nationally collected, data. However, inspectors will focus on what is taught and how, and will draw the outcomes that learners achieve into that education-focused, rather than data-focused, conversation.⁴

³ DfE, [Pioneering new approach to assessing pupils with complex disabilities to be introduced in schools](#), 22 November 2018.

⁴ Ofsted, [Consultation outcome. Education inspection framework 2019: inspecting the substance of education](#), 29 July 2019.

1.4 Headline measures in 2019 primary school performance tables

The headline measures for schools at the end of key stage 2 are:

- The percentage of pupils achieving the nationally expected standard in all of English reading, English writing and mathematics.
- Pupils' average scaled score in:
 - English reading
 - Mathematics

A scaled score is an adjusted score produced from raw marks, to allow consistency between years.

- The percentage of pupils who achieve at a higher standard in English reading, English writing and mathematics.
- Pupils' average progress in English reading, English writing and mathematics. As the name suggests this measure aims to capture the progress schools make with their pupils, given their different attainment levels at the end of key stage 1. This is a type of value added measure.

1.5 Finding school performance data

The DfE publishes a range of statistics on primary attainment and progress. Summary statistics for individual schools can be found on the DfE's [Compare School Performance](#) website.

Data on performance in the early years and in key stage 1 is published at local authority, regional and national level:

- DfE collection, [Statistics: early years foundation stage profile](#).
- DfE collection, [Statistics: key stage 1](#).

Most of the key stage 2 national curriculum assessments data is reported at school level; parliamentary constituency-level data is also published as part of the underlying data:

- DfE collection, [Statistics: key stage 2](#).

2. Historical background: primary assessment

2.1 SATs reform – timeline of key developments since 2010

A short summary of the key milestones in the reform of national curriculum assessments, or SATs, since 2010 is provided below.

- **June 2011.** Lord Bew's Government-commissioned review of Key Stage 2 assessment arrangements and the role of SATs is published.⁵ Among other things, this backed the retention of external school level accountability (e.g., assessment). It also recommended that, in the medium term, the use of national curriculum 'levels' for reporting children's attainment should be reviewed. The then-Government's response was published on 18 July 2011, accepting all of Lord Bew's recommendations.⁶
- **June 2012:** phonics screening check becomes mandatory for pupils at the end of year 1 (age 5 to 6). This tests whether children are secure in 'decoding' words (as opposed to recognising them on sight).
- **July 2013:** the Coalition Government published final proposals for primary assessment and accountability arrangements under the new curriculum, for consultation.⁷ This confirmed the intention to scrap national curriculum levels as a way of reporting attainment. This move, the then-Government said, would allow schools greater freedom to decide for themselves how to track the progress pupils make.⁸
- **Summer 2013:** a new focus in KS2 SATs on punctuation, grammar, spelling and vocabulary.
- **February 2015:** Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, announces that a Commission on assessment without levels would be set up to support primary schools.⁹
- **November 2015:** Education Secretary Nicky Morgan announces plans to require students to resit their SATs if they don't meet the required level at the end of KS2.
- **March 2016:** Government publishes White Paper, Educational Excellence Everywhere; among other things, this promises reform of primary assessment.

⁵ Lord Bew, [Independent review of key stage 2 testing, assessment and accountability: final report](#), 23 June 2011

⁶ DfE, [Government response to Lord Bew key stage 2 review published](#), 18 July 2011

⁷ DfE, [Primary assessment and accountability under the new national curriculum](#), 17 July 2013.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ ['Assessment without levels commission announced'](#), DfE press release, 25 Feb 2015.

11 Assessment and testing in primary education (England)

- **April 2016:** Government announces the three 'baseline tests' for reception children are not sufficiently comparable and will not be used as planned for school accountability purposes.
- **Summer term 2016:** first KS1 and KS2 national curriculum assessments based on revised national curriculum, reported as scaled scores rather than levels.
- **September 2016:** Provisional results from 2016 KS1 and KS2 assessment announced. At KS2, 53% of children achieved the expected standard in all of reading, writing and maths.
- **October 2016:** Education Secretary makes [Statement to Parliament](#) on the future of primary assessment. This confirms no new national tests or assessments will be introduced before the 2018-19 academic year, and that the plans to make some year 7 (secondary) pupils resit their SATs was being scrapped.
- **March 2017:** two consultations are launched by the DfE: [one on the future of primary assessment](#) and the other on [implementing the recommendations of the Rochford Review](#) for assessing attainment and progress of children with SEND.
- **September 2017:** Government publishes response to the March 2017 consultations.
- **Summer term 2019:** schools could opt in to trial the multiplication tables check for year 4 pupils (aged 8 or 9).
- **2019-20 academic year:** times table (multiplication) check will become a requirement for year four pupils. Schools will administer it in June 2020.
- **September 2020:** planned introduction of baseline assessment for reception age children, following a large-scale pilot in the 2019-20 academic year.

About the Library

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email hcinfo@parliament.uk.

Disclaimer

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).