



BRIEFING PAPER

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SATs and primary school assessment in England

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Summary

What are SATs, or national curriculum assessments?

SATs, or national curriculum assessments as they are formally known, are assessments of primary pupils' progress and attainment. In the last year of primary schooling (year six), the assessments are more formal and the results are reported at school level. This allows for comparison between different schools.

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

There are national curriculum tests and assessments at the end of Key Stage 1 (infant phase) and Key Stage 2 (end of primary/ junior phase). At KS2, the results are published in national performance tables - sometimes known as league tables.

What has changed in primary assessments and SATs?

In parallel with wider reforms to the curriculum, the 2015 Government significantly reformed the content of the national curriculum assessments and tests. They also changed the way that the results were reported. The Government said that the new assessments were tougher, and the expected standard higher. The intention was to better prepare children for secondary education. However, the introduction of the new assessment arrangements attracted significant criticism from teaching unions and others – both on the underlying principle of testing young children, and on the nature and pace of the changes.

What did the 2015 Government say in response to criticism about the 2016 SATs?

On 19 October 2016, Education Secretary Justine Greening said in a Statement that the then-Government was committed to a period of stability in primary assessment, and would consult further in 2017. No new national assessments would be introduced before 2018-19, nor would planned resits for year seven pupils (first year of secondary schooling) who hadn't reached the expected standards at the end of their primary schooling. The grammar, spelling and punctuation tests aimed at children in year two (age six or seven) would remain non-statutory, meaning schools did not have to administer them.

Consultation on primary assessment – March 2017

The Department for Education (DfE) launched a consultation on the future of primary assessment in March 2017. This closed in June 2017. It asked for views on a range of proposals, including:

- The introduction of a new reception baseline assessment to serve as a starting point for measuring progress at all-through primary schools.
- The removal of some current statutory assessments.
- The introduction of a times table check from 2018-19.

1. How are primary school children tested and assessed currently?

The table below shows the assessments and tests that take place at various points during primary schooling.

When?	What?	How results are published
Reception class (age 4 or 5)	Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP)	Reported only 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– teacher assessment in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maths; • English reading; science; • English writing; 	Reported at LA level.
Year 6 (age 10 or 11), end of key stage 2	KS2 national curriculum assessments (SATs) – externally-marked tests and teacher assessment in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maths; • English reading, grammar, punctuation and spelling; 	Some results are published at school level, enabling comparison between individual schools.

1.1 Current assessment arrangements in English primary schools

All maintained schools are required to participate in national curriculum assessments; these are often known as SATs. Academies and free schools usually have clauses in their funding agreements requiring participation in the assessment and accountability arrangements. There are different arrangements for some pupils in non-mainstream settings, such as hospital schools.

Statutory guidance on the arrangements for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 assessment in 2018 has been published by the Standards and Testing Agency (STA):

- STA, [2018 key stage 1: Assessment and reporting arrangements](#), 16 October 2017.
- STA, [2018: key stage 2: assessment and reporting arrangements](#), 16 October 2017.

Maintained schools and academies

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

2. Changes to SATs since 2015

- There were major changes to KS1 and KS2 assessments in summer 2016.
- The 2015 Government said that the standards expected of pupils were now higher than in previous years.
- There was strong criticism of the nature and pace of the changes.
- In March 2017, the then-Government launched a consultation on the future of primary assessment.

2.1 Changes to SATs in 2016 following national curriculum review

From September 2014, a revised national curriculum has been phased in in England – further details on curriculum reform can be found in a linked Commons Library briefing paper:

- [House of Commons Library briefing, The school curriculum in England.](#)

The measures used to assess children’s attainment and progress during primary schooling underwent significant change from 2015 onward:

- The content of assessments has been amended to align with revised national curriculum material. The 2015 Government said the new tests and assessments were intended to be more stretching.
- The way that attainment is assessed and reported both during and at the end of key stages has changed. National curriculum levels have been scrapped. Instead, assessment results are reported as a scaled or standardised score. Further details about scaled scores are available in a DfE website article:
 - [DfE website article, Scaled scores at KS1, updated 6 June 2017](#)
 - [DfE website article, Scaled scores at KS2, updated 4 July 2017.](#)
- A baseline check was planned for introduction nationally in September 2016. This was to enable pupils’ progress to be tracked during their school career. The results of the baseline check were to be used in school accountability measures. However, the Government announced in April 2016 that the baseline checks would not be used for accountability purposes in 2016/17, owing to concerns about the comparability of results from the different available versions of the baseline assessments.

National curriculum levels: descriptors of children’s attainment, no longer in use following national curriculum reform.

Scaled score: a numerical score achieved by children at the end of KS2 following curriculum reform. 100 is considered the ‘secondary ready’ standard.

2.2 Criticism of 2016 SATs changes

The changes to national curriculum assessments in 2016, and the manner of their introduction attracted sustained criticism from teaching unions.

In February 2016, the NUT called for the 2016 SATs “to be abandoned”. The new assessment requirements were, it said, “wholly unachievable by teachers”.¹ Kevin Courtney, then Deputy General Secretary, continued:

The changes have been brought in without forethought, evidence or planning, and rushed through with desperately inadequate notice. The result is complete chaos.

The Government has consistently said they wish to decrease teacher workload, but the new assessment system dramatically increases it.

Despite the school year starting over five months ago, the required ‘exemplifications’ for the teacher assessment of writing have only just been released to schools. The workload implications of the evidence requirements are immense and will be frankly unachievable for many. The requirement for pupils to produce such a large amount of evidence with half the academic year already gone will almost certainly lead to time being used up in all other areas of the curriculum to achieve the required results.

As if this weren’t bad enough, the criteria for assessment will change again in September for the new school year. The Government’s pattern of behaviour suggests that these will also be delivered late, and cause further turbulence and needless stress.

The standard that pupils are expected to achieve has also been set far higher than last year’s levels. It is one thing for a government to aspire to raise standards, it is quite another to think that this can be achieved by moving the goalposts so substantially overnight. Many schools that have recently done well in Ofsted inspections may have 0% of children at this new expected standard. The negative effects on pupils’ well-being and teachers’ morale should be plain.²

Writing in the *TES* on 16 February 2016, the then-General Secretary of the ATL³, Mary Bousted, also strongly criticised the Government’s approach and raised significant concerns about the demands the revised assessment regime would place on both children and teachers:

The latest stage in the assessment saga is the key stage 2 teacher assessment exemplifications for writing, which were released last week. Many teachers, who had been waiting anxiously for these materials, must, when they opened them, have despaired. Not only has the standard for reaching the expected level been very significantly raised (more akin to an old level 5 rather than the

¹ NUT press release, ‘[Primary schools in chaos and despair with new KS1 and KS2 assessments](#)’ 17 February 2016.

² *Ibid.*

³ The ATL has subsequently merged with the NUT to form the National Education Union (NEU).

promised 4b), but also the assessment burden placed on Year 6 teachers is huge and unworkable.

If schools follow the government's guidance, a teacher of a Year 6 class has to make 34 separate assessments, for each pupil, for six different types of writing. So, a teacher with a class of 30 pupils will have to make 1,020 separate assessments for each type of writing, and that number needs to be multiplied by six (one for each type of writing) – making a grand total of 6,120 assessments. And that is just for writing.⁴

Government response to concerns – February 2016

On 18 February 2016, Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, wrote to Russell Hobby, General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT).⁵ His letter challenged some of the assertions made about the practical burden on teachers, and gave assurances that Ofsted and Regional Schools Commissioners should take into account the 2016 assessment changes when judging schools' performance:

I have [...] asked STA to produce a 'clarification' document which will minimise any misunderstandings regarding assessment arrangements for the 2016 national curriculum tests and teacher assessments. Specifically, we will aim to eliminate misunderstanding leading to unnecessary, additional workload. We will ensure that NAHT have sight of a draft and are able to comment prior to publication which is planned for the beginning of March.

You also subsequently raised concerns from your members about the standard for Key Stage 2 writing that is demonstrated in the exemplification materials published on the 8 February 2016. I remain committed to the high standards that we have set for the primary phase and it is important to note that the exemplification materials were provided in draft by teacher panels from a selection of schools. The materials were produced by pupils currently in Year 2 or Year 6 as part of normal class work. These materials were reviewed by a drafting expert team and in discussion with the teacher panel prior to finalisation by STA. STA will of course, review and evaluate all materials at the end of the academic year.

We will, however, shortly be publishing the revised Schools Causing Concern guidance following our consultation, which will set expectations for Regional Schools Commissioners [RSCs] and local authorities when they take action to tackle underperformance. Where a warning notice is considered, the guidance will set out a range of factors, for instance performance trends, that RSCs and local authorities will want to consider in determining whether to act.⁶

On 22 February 2016, then Education Secretary Nicky Morgan posted a [video message](#) with further responses to issues raised by some commentators.⁷ In this, she said that "some of the claims being made by the media and some of the unions aren't just disingenuous – they're

⁴ ['Like a horror show: It is difficult to comprehend the government's stupidity over testing in schools'](#), *TES Online*, 16 February 2016.

⁵ [Letter from Nick Gibb to Russell Hobby](#), 18 February 2015

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ [Message from @NickyMorgan01 on Primary Assessments](#), 22 February 2016

plain wrong". She also challenged claims about potential administrative burdens:

The exemplification materials published earlier this year are to support you when you interpret the interim measures. If you're confident that you can work to the 'pupil can' statements for your class, don't feel that you need to use them as a template. We trust your judgment. Stories about how teachers need to make checklists of hundreds of different check boxes are also just plain wrong. The key thing is that each child should be encouraged to reach their full potential.⁸

On 8 March 2016, the STA published a further [clarification document](#) summarising the recent changes to assessments and offering further advice on teacher assessment and the use of the exemplification materials.⁹

2.3 April 2016 – reception baseline assessment announcement

The Government had intended to introduce, nationally, a new baseline assessment for children entering reception classes in September 2016. Schools were able to opt in early to a pilot phase from September 2015.

Three assessments were available. The results of the tests were to be used to gauge how much progress pupils in a particular setting made from their different starting points.

On 7 April 2016, the Government announced the results of a study on the three baseline assessments. This concluded that the assessments were "not sufficiently comparable to create a fair starting point from which to measure pupils' progress".¹⁰ As a result, baseline assessment outcomes would not be used for school accountability purposes. Schools, however, could still opt to use the baseline assessments in the 2016-17 academic year.¹¹

A later consultation (launched March 2017) proposed the development and introduction of a new baseline assessment – there is more information on this in section 2.7, below.

2.4 October 2016: Statement on future of primary assessment

On 19 October 2016, Education Secretary Justine Greening made a Statement to Parliament on the future of primary assessment and testing:

- [Secretary of State for Education, Written Statement to Parliament. Primary education, 19 October 2016.](#)

⁸ [Message from @NickyMorgan01 on Primary Assessments](#), 22 February 2016

⁹ Standards and Testing Agency, [Clarification: key stage 1 and 2 teacher assessment and moderation guidance](#), 8 March 2016.

¹⁰ DfE press release, ['Reception baseline comparability study published'](#), 7 April 2016

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The statement acknowledged that the pace and scale of the changes to date had been “stretching”.¹² It also said:

- As part of a drive to “develop a longer-term, sustainable approach”,¹³ there would be a consultation in the new year 2017 which would ask for views on subjects including:
 - The role of teacher assessment.
 - How pupils working below the expected standard should be assessed.
 - The best ‘starting point’ to use to assess progress through primary school. Previously, the government had intended to use something called the reception baseline, but this plan was abandoned after finding problems with comparability between three commissioned baseline assessments.
- The key stage 1 grammar, punctuation and spelling test would remain non-statutory for 2017, meaning that schools can choose whether to run it or not.
- There would be mandatory training for local authority officers responsible for moderating national curriculum assessments.
- There would now be a period of stability, and no new national tests or assessments would be introduced before 2018-19.
- Previously-announced plans to require children who hadn’t met the expected standard at the end of KS2 to re-sit the assessments in year 7 (first year of secondary) had been scrapped.
- No more than 6 per cent of primary schools would fall below the floor standard in 2016 and intervention in schools would not be based solely on 2016 SATs performance.

2.5 Reaction to October 2016 statement on primary assessment

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) welcomed what it described as the Education Secretary’s “common sense approach” and said that the “promised period of stability is very sensible”.¹⁴ NASUWT commended the Government’s “positive response” to issues the union had been lobbying on. It urged the Government to ensure that the changes would actually reduce teacher workload while also ensuring that schools were judged “on the right things in the right way”.¹⁵

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) General Secretary, Russell Hobby, said he was “pleased that the new Secretary of State had

¹² DfE/ STA, [Written Statement to Parliament: primary education](#), 19 October 2016.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ ASCL press release, ‘[ASCL welcomes Justine Greening’s common sense approach](#)’, 19 October 2016.

¹⁵ NASUWT press notice, ‘[Changes to primary assessment welcome but will only make a difference if the Government ensures compliance](#)’, 19 October 2016.

listened to the concerns of school leaders and teachers” but that the Government “still fails to fully recognise the inadequacies of last year’s data when it comes to judging school performance”. The union would await further details on the Government’s plans.¹⁶

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) similarly said that it was “positive” that the Education Secretary recognises that “we need better answers to the question of how to fairly measure primary schools and assess children’s development.” However, they criticised the fact that children would still “be learning inappropriate grammar”. It remained a “deep concern that many children will, once again, wrongly be told that they haven’t reached an ‘expected’ standard.”¹⁷

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) welcomed the statement which, it said, signalled “a new approach by the Government to working more closely with teachers, heads and education professionals.”¹⁸

David Reedy, a co-director of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust and General Secretary of the United Kingdom Literacy Association, said:

There is a welcome acknowledgement in the tone of the statement that current arrangements are not working, although the last point has alarming implications about the introduction of further, unnecessary, high stakes tests.

[...]

Another ‘consultation’ is not needed, What is needed is a thorough, independent, review where all stakeholders are represented and a government that is prepared to listen and respond positively.¹⁹

2.6 Education Committee inquiry into primary assessment

On 23 September 2016 the then-Education Committee announced an inquiry into primary assessment.

Their [report](#) was published on 1 May 2017. The Committee concluded:

- The ‘high stakes’ linking of assessment and accountability can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum and ‘teaching to the test’ – i.e., focusing on the content and technique needed to perform well on tests at the expense of other learning.
- The publication of yearly data should be scrapped and replaced with rolling three-year averages of KS2 performance.

¹⁶ NAHT press release, [‘NAHT comment on government changes to assessment’](#), 19 October 2016.

¹⁷ NUT press release, [‘Justine Greening announcement on primary assessment’](#), 19 October 2016

¹⁸ ATL press release, [‘ATL comment on Government’s statement on primary assessment’](#), 5 November 2016.

¹⁹ CPRT/ David Reedy blog post, [‘Assessment, testing and accountability: a suggestion for an alternative framework’](#), 21 October 2016.

- Schools' inspectorate, Ofsted, should focus on a range of subjects, aside from English and maths and should not focus "too heavily" on KS2 data.
- The current approach to assessing writing – which the Committee said over-emphasised technical aspects at the expense of creativity and composition skills – should be reconsidered.
- That the introduction of a baseline measure should be approached with caution, and its primary purpose should be as a diagnostic tool.
- In future, schools should be given "at least a year" to prepare for changes in assessment, "without incremental changes throughout the year".²⁰

The Committee published the [Government's response](#) to its report on 30 November 2017.²¹

2.7 March 2017 consultation on future of primary assessment

On 30 March 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) and Standards and Testing Agency (STA) launched a consultation on the future of primary assessment in England:

- [Link to DfE/ STA consultation on primary assessment, 30 March 2017](#)

The consultation closed on 22 June 2017.

Proposals included:

- Retention of modified Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.
- Alongside this, introduction of a new reception baseline assessment. This would serve as a starting point to measure pupils' progress between beginning and ending their primary schooling.
- Making the current end of KS1 tests and assessments non-statutory – i.e., optional for all-through primary schools once a new baseline assessment was fully established.
- Making changes to the assessment and accountability arrangements for infant, junior and middle schools.
- Removing the requirement for teacher assessment in English reading and mathematics at the end of KS2.
- Allowing more flexibility for teacher assessment of English writing.
- Retaining the KS1 grammar, punctuation and spelling test as a *non*-statutory test.
- Introducing a times tables check from 2018-19.

The Government published its [response](#)²² to the consultation on 14 September 2017, confirming that it would implement the plans in a

²⁰ Education Committee, [Primary assessment, Eleventh Report of Session 2016–17](#), 1 May 2017, see summary on p3; p7.

²¹ Education Committee, [Primary assessment: Government Response to the Committee's Eleventh Report of Session 2016–17](#), HC 501, 30 November 2017.

²² DfE, [Primary assessment in England: Government response](#)

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phased manner. Alongside the consultation response, it also published revised statutory teacher assessment frameworks for English writing – previous versions of these had been heavily criticised by teaching unions and others.

A parallel consultation considered assessment 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'.
- 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.

The Government published its [response to the consultation](#) on 14 September 2017, confirming the plans.²³

²³ DfE, [Primary school pupil assessment: Rochford Review recommendations, 14 September 2017](#).

2.8 2017 SATs results

In December 2017, the STA published final national data²⁴ on performance in the KS2 SATs:

	% of all children reaching expected standard			
	Reading	Grammar, punctuation and spelling	Maths	In Reading, writing and maths
KS2	72%	77%	75%	61%

Finding data on school performance in particular areas or for individual schools (at KS2)

Provisional data for key stage 1 in 2017, and breakdowns by local authority area, can be found on the Gov.uk website:

- [DfE, Statistics: key stage 1](#)

Revised data for key stage 2 in 2017 can also be accessed on the Gov.uk website:

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

²⁴ Adapted from: [DfE, National curriculum assessments at key stage 2 in England, 2017 \(revised\) SFR 69/2017](#), 14 December 2017

3. Historical background on primary assessment

3.1 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶
- **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 Government published final proposals for primary assessment and accountability arrangements under the new curriculum, for consultation.²⁷ This confirmed the intention to scrap national curriculum levels as a way of reporting attainment. This move, the Government said, would allow schools greater freedom to decide for themselves how to track the progress pupils make.²⁸ Pupil results would be reported as a 'scaled score'.
- **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.²⁹
- **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.

²⁵ Lord Bew, [Independent review of key stage 2 testing, assessment and accountability: final report](#), 23 June 2011

²⁶ DfE, [Government response to Lord Bew key stage 2 review published](#), 18 July 2011

²⁷ DfE, [Primary assessment and accountability under the new national curriculum](#), 17 July 2013.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁹ ['Assessment without levels commission announced'](#), DfE press release, 25 Feb 2015.

- **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.
- **April 2016:** Government announces KS1 grammar, punctuation and spelling test need not be administered in 2016 only. Some live question papers were inadvertently published online.
- **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.

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