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Corporate report

National assessments regulation annual report 2024

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Executive summary

Ofqual regulates all aspects of the development and delivery of national assessments. This report details our regulatory activity and findings in relation to these assessments in 2024. Overall, in 2024 national assessment delivery was successful.

The Standards and Testing Agency (STA) followed its consistent approach to the

test development processes. The views of a range of experts, including teachers, as well as quantitative data from trialling informed the key decisions about the national assessments administered in 2024. STA completed the statistical process necessary for the maintenance of standards in the usual way. Ofqual is satisfied the results in 2024 can be robustly linked to the standards as they were originally set in 2016.

STA was able to return more than 99.9% of KS2 results to schools on time. Ofqual's analysis of KS2 marking quality showed a high degree of reliability in 2024; this key marking reliability metric has remained consistent since 2018.

2025 will be the last year that the current contractor Capita will deliver the national assessment tests. In addition, STA plans to introduce a new version of the Reception Baseline Assessment from September 2025. Ofqual will continue to monitor risks to validity from any changes to the arrangements for national assessments.

Introduction

About national assessments regulation

Ofqual [\[footnote 1\]](#) is accountable to Parliament for the regulation of statutory early years foundation stage profile (EYFSP) assessments and statutory national curriculum assessments. The latter, which include the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA), the Phonics Screening Check (PSC), the Multiplication Tables Check (MTC), and Key Stage 2 (KS2) tests, are together referred to as 'national assessments'.

Ofqual's 2 statutory objectives in relation to national assessments are:

- 1) to promote the development and implementation of national assessments that give a reliable and consistent indication of achievement; and indicate a consistent level of attainment, including over time, between comparable assessments, and
- 2) to promote public confidence in national assessments.

The [regulatory framework](#) explains how Ofqual regulates national assessments in

practice. Ofqual takes a risk-based approach to achieving its objectives, which means we focus on those assessments that have the ‘highest stakes’, such as those relied upon within school accountability measures. In 2024 the KS2 assessment cycle and developments regarding RBA formed the main focus of Ofqual’s regulatory monitoring.

Ofqual focuses on validity, that is, the quality of assessment. In practice, this means that we seek to ensure that the results of the assessments meet their specified statutory purposes and can therefore be trusted by those who use them. Ofqual’s regulation seeks to provide independent assurance about the robustness of processes used to develop and deliver national assessments and to identify risks to validity that can be addressed over time. Ofqual has a duty to report to the Secretary of State for Education if it believes there is, or is likely to be, a significant failing in national assessment arrangements in relation to achieving one or more of their specified purposes.

The body primarily responsible for national curriculum assessments is the Standards and Testing Agency (STA). STA is an executive agency within the Department for Education (DfE) and contracts suppliers to help develop, deliver or monitor national assessments. Other organisations also have responsibility for some aspects of national assessments, including local authorities, schools and, in the case of early years assessment, other parts of the DfE.

In 2024, Ofqual fulfilled its objectives by monitoring, observing and scrutinising key aspects of the development and delivery of national assessments and our findings are presented in this report.

Context for 2024

2024 was the third year that Capita was responsible for managing the delivery of the test cycle for national assessments.

During 2024 Ofqual reviewed its Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with STA. The MoU sets out the working relationship agreed between Ofqual and STA and will be published in 2025. The revised MoU clarifies the information Ofqual routinely expects from STA to be able to satisfy its regulatory objectives.

For the 2024 test cycle, the information Ofqual requested from STA included evidence of STA’s state of operational readiness to deliver the national assessment cycle together with operational data during delivery such as marking progress.

Ofqual also required STA to provide evidence of its identification and management of risks and issues. This approach broadly aligns to Ofqual's expectations of awarding organisations delivering regulated qualifications.

Section A: Priorities for 2024

Ofqual's regulatory activity for 2024 continued to focus on processes that support the development of national assessments including the KS2 tests. In addition, Ofqual prioritised enhanced monitoring of risks identified during recent cycles of delivery such as the progress of external marking and the performance of the Primary Assessment Gateway (the PAG) which provides school-facing services.

Ofqual sought assurance about the effectiveness of STA's management of risks in several ways. Ofqual observed a sample of STA's test development and marker training meetings as well as attending KS2 standards maintenance. In addition, Ofqual requested information and relevant documentation from STA, which included its approach to managing the risks associated with the development and delivery of national assessments, and met regularly with senior STA staff.

Another priority for Ofqual in 2024 was the continuation of our work to independently assure the quality of marking of the KS2 tests.

These priorities informed the activity Ofqual undertook in regulating national assessments this year.

Section B: Monitoring in 2024

The test development process

STA is responsible for developing national curriculum assessments and a detailed explanation of the development processes for KS2 assessments is published by STA in the [national curriculum test development handbook](#). An updated version of the handbook was published in October 2024.

Ofqual's observations of the test development process

In 2024, Ofqual observed a sample of the governance mechanisms that STA uses to manage KS2 test development. Monitoring test development governance provides Ofqual with the most efficient point at which to observe STA operating its processes that ultimately determine the contents of a national assessment.

STA followed a defined approach to the structure of these meetings across the KS2 subjects, thereby ensuring the purposes of the governance processes were consistently achieved. STA's senior officials were presented with summary information gathered throughout the item development process which encompasses the views of a range of experts, including teachers, as well as quantitative data from trialling. It is this evidence that STA then uses as the basis for the decisions to approve the items and texts that make up the content of the live tests.

The meetings Ofqual observed clearly illustrated STA's use of appropriate validity evidence to inform the development and content of national assessments.

Marking KS2 tests

STA's delivery contractor is responsible for marking KS2 tests, including the recruitment of sufficiently expert markers. [Ofqual has reported previously](#) on the make-up and experience of the KS2 marking workforce. The [national curriculum test development handbook](#) describes in detail the process used to quality assure both marker training and live marking to ensure marking is reliable.

For the externally marked KS2 tests, completed scripts are collected from schools and scanned before they are marked onscreen. Items or sets of items with similar marking principles are grouped into different 'segments'. The segments are classified as either 'regular' or 'specialist', depending on the level of expertise needed to mark them. Individual markers (designated as regular or specialist markers) then mark particular segments, once they have passed the quality assurance requirements for those segments. Organising live marking in this way maximises the opportunity for reliability.

Ofqual's observations of the marker training process

In 2024, Ofqual attended a sample of online marker training events for KS2 English reading, mathematics and grammar, punctuation and spelling assessments for both

regular and specialist markers. This included user acceptance testing. The purpose of the training, including the processes that support training and marking, were clear to all those participating. The training focused on ensuring that markers understood the mark scheme and could consistently apply it to examples of pupils' answers, as well as the need to maintain the security and confidentiality of the training materials.

In the sample of meetings Ofqual observed, the delivery of marker training was aligned to the processes described in the test handbook that are designed to support reliable marking of KS2 tests.

Ofqual's analysis of the quality of KS2 marking

Ofqual analysed operational marking data from 2024 using the same methodology described in previous [national assessment regulation annual reports](#). This enables comparisons of the quality of marking to be made over time.

During live marking, one of the ways markers demonstrate they are applying the mark scheme consistently is by marking responses known as 'seeds' which have already been marked by a more senior marker. The seeds are introduced into marker's allocations of responses at times and intervals unknown to the marker.

Approximately 1 in 40 responses marked by each marker are seeds. A comparison of the mark determined by the senior marker for the seed and the mark awarded by the marker provides an assessment of the marker's performance against the pre-agreed standard.

We deem that a suitable measure of consistency of marking is based on an analysis of the difference between the marks set by senior markers for the seeds and the actual marks awarded. This methodology is intended to give an indication of the true level of agreement across all pupil responses. It relies on the assumption that responses selected as seeds are representative of all pupil responses, in terms of their difficulty to mark.

Ofqual's analysis in 2024 found that across all 3 externally marked KS2 subjects, markers agreed with the mark set by senior markers for 99.4% of the seeds.

Figure 1: Combined agreement levels for all 3 externally marked KS2 subjects between 2016 and 2024

There were no KS2 assessments in 2020 or 2021 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 1 illustrates that the agreement level in 2024 is the same as the values obtained in 2023, 2022, 2019 and 2018.

Based on our observations and analysis, Ofqual concludes that the training and quality assurance measures for external marking of English reading, mathematics and grammar, punctuation and spelling were effective in 2024.

Moderation of KS2 writing teacher assessment

Ofqual's national assessment regulation annual reports in [2022](#) and [2023](#) describe moderation of teacher assessment for KS2 writing assessments in detail. In summary, STA approval to moderate English writing is only granted to local authority moderators that successfully complete a standardisation exercise. Moderators are allowed 2 chances to pass one of 3 exercises.

In 2024, the pass rates for standardisation exercises 1 to 3 were 54%, 82% and 67% respectively. Although the pass rate for exercise 1 is lower than was achieved for exercise 1 in 2023 (87%), the pass rates for exercises 2 and 3 were higher.

Overall, 2,889 KS2 moderators passed the standardisation exercises, which was slightly more than was achieved in 2023.

Prior to the moderation period, STA confirmed it had no concerns about the number of moderators available in 2024.

Standards maintenance

A key requirement of national assessments is that the tests allow for accurate comparisons of performance to be made. Standards maintenance processes are therefore needed to accommodate differences in test difficulty that arise from building tests from a new set of questions each year.

Following a review of the primary curriculum, new assessments were administered in schools in 2016 and new standards were set. Standards maintenance is a statistical process that links the performance of pupils in the subsequent years of administering KS2 national assessments to that original standard. This approach ensures that the meaning of the test result remains consistent over time.

A more detailed description of this process can be found in the [national curriculum test handbook](#) and Ofqual's [national assessments regulation annual report for 2023](#).

Ofqual's observations of the standards maintenance process

The process for maintaining test standards in 2024 was based on the same assumptions and professionally recognised techniques as in previous years and was carried out in line with STA's [published description](#).

Ofqual observed the standards maintenance meeting for KS2 national assessments in 2024 and is satisfied that the approach STA took provided a robust link to the standards as originally set in 2016.

Operational delivery in 2024

In 2024, the KS2 tests were administered in the week commencing 13 May. External marking was completed to schedule. Approximately 3.9 million scripts, divided into

49 million segments, were marked by approximately 4,000 markers across the 3 subjects. Consequently, standards maintenance procedures were completed on time and STA returned more than 99.9% of results to schools on return of results day.

STA notified Ofqual that a total of 350 pupils' scripts were declared lost in 2024, similar to the number reported lost in 2023 (353). This year, the significant majority of these scripts were lost in one incident when they were incorrectly dispatched by a school. Despite the efforts of Capita and STA these scripts could not be traced. In addition, a small number of scripts initially thought lost were subsequently located after return of results day.

As part of ongoing continuous improvement, STA have confirmed that over the past 3 years Capita has been enhancing processes for package and script reconciliation.

Ofqual's observations of national assessment delivery in 2024

Ahead of the peak delivery period for national assessments (which is between March and July each year), STA provided Ofqual with evidence of its, and its contractor's, readiness to deliver the 2024 national assessments cycle. STA also outlined its approach to the identification and management of organisational and operational risks.

During the cycle Ofqual sought additional assurance from STA on emerging risks, such as where a change in the delivery contractor's print supplier occurred in December 2023. This risk was managed by STA and the contractor, with subsequent printing milestones achieved.

Throughout the peak delivery period for 2024, Ofqual received regular progress updates from STA including daily updates on the rates of marking.

In relation to the delivery issues Ofqual previously reported on in 2023:

- The system issue that caused the one-week delay to the start of marking in May 2023 was not repeated in 2024. Prior to the peak delivery period, STA confirmed that improvements and new procedures would ensure resilience of the scanning and marking systems throughout the marking period. The contractor also recruited more markers in 2024 compared with 2023 to further reduce the risk to the timely completion of marking.
- Ofqual has previously reported on the performance of the national assessment helpline that supports schools during test administration. In 2024, 97% of calls to the helpline were answered and 78% were answered within 15 seconds. This

represents a significant improvement on 2023, when 65% of calls were answered and the average wait time was 22 minutes.

- In light of the issues schools experienced with the PAG on return of results day in 2023, STA confirmed that, in 2024, its delivery contractor would implement a digital queuing system to manage schools accessing the PAG when downloading their results. STA confirmed there were no reports of difficulties which prevented schools accessing their results in 2024.

Once results are returned to schools, STA offers a review of results service that is open during July. The outcomes from the submitted reviews were returned to schools on time on 11 September.

Following the test series STA also investigates cases of maladministration of national assessments with the outcomes published in the following academic year. STA's most [recent report on maladministration](#) concerns the national assessments taken in 2023.

Overall, national assessment delivery was successful in 2024. Risks associated with printing, marking, return of results and the services provided to schools were appropriately managed.

Section C: Summary of 2024 delivery

The development of assessment materials for KS2 in 2024 followed the published processes detailed in the subject-level [test frameworks](#) and [national curriculum test handbook](#). Marker training was delivered successfully again and the quality of marking of the KS2 assessments, as measured through the use of 'seed' responses, was high across all subjects and was in line with previous years. Marking was completed to schedule and nearly all results returned to schools on the published results day, with no significant issues arising in delivery this cycle.

The outcomes of the KS2 assessments, the MTC and the PSC are published by the DfE and can be found by accessing the [explore education statistics service](#).

Section D: Looking forward

The Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA)

While STA continues to offer KS1 assessments as optional tests, Ofqual has, in line with its remit, ceased its oversight of KS1 development and delivery. The reference point from which progress to KS2 will be measured is now the RBA.

RBA assesses early mathematics, language, communication and literacy knowledge and is administered to pupils in the first 6 weeks of each new academic year. The version used in schools in 2023 was originally developed by NFER in 2019 and is delivered by them on behalf of STA. The first year where school progress will be calculated using the new measure will be 2028. The reception baseline is an 'in-year' measure, meaning that progress determined by the RBA is only used to compare schools within that academic year. Progress scores are not compared between years.

STA has been developing a new version of the RBA since 2019 which it had initially planned to roll out in September 2024. However, in January 2024, STA confirmed to schools that the change would be delayed until September 2025. STA's version of RBA will be delivered to schools via a new online assessment platform.

In view of the essential role that RBA now plays in England's primary schools, Ofqual has monitored the development of STA's new version of the RBA. In the summer of 2024, Ofqual specifically required STA to provide evidence of its progress towards safe delivery of the RBA in 2025. This included identifying upcoming milestones STA intended to achieve together with its approach to the management of all the risks associated with the project. While significant progress has been made, further development work needs to be completed prior to delivery of the new version of RBA in 2025.

National assessment delivery in 2025 and 2026

Ahead of the peak period for national assessments in 2025, Ofqual will again expect STA to confirm its readiness for delivery together with evidence of the implementation of lessons learned during 2024.

In April 2024 STA announced that Pearson would be the new contractor responsible for delivering national assessments in 2026. Consequently, 2025 will be the last year in which Capita will be providing this service to STA. Over the coming year Ofqual will be seeking assurance from STA regarding its plans to manage the risks associated with this transition.

1. Ofqual was set up in April 2010 under the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 and is also covered by the Education Act 2011. [↔](#)

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