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Research and analysis

# National Reference Test annual statement 2026

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## Applies to England

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Ofqual has today, Thursday 20 August, published the results of the National Reference Test (NRT) in 2026. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) Results Digest shows the results alongside those from previous years.

Having analysed the results from both the English language and maths NRT, and following application of our established principles to support our judgements, Ofqual required exam boards to take the results of the NRT into account in the grading of

GCSE maths, to ensure that grades continue to reflect student attainment. In English, Ofqual determined that NRT results do not represent a clear, sustained change in attainment.

## Background

In February and March 2026, over 13,500 year 11 students from 350 schools in England took the National Reference Test in English or maths, which is administered by NFER. The tests are designed to provide evidence of the performance of 16-year-old students in English language and maths and were introduced to provide additional evidence to support the awarding of GCSEs in these subjects. The first live NRT, taken in 2017, was benchmarked against the first awards of the reformed GCSEs in English language and maths, and subsequent tests compare the performance of students with those in previous years.

Results are reported at 3 grade boundaries – grade 7, grade 5 and grade 4. Results are reported as expected percentages of students achieving those grades (and above) based on changes in performance on the NRT. This overview focuses on grades 7 and 4, since these would be the points through which an adjustment would most likely be applied operationally.

## Results for 2026

The results for the 2026 tests are outlined below. Because these tests use a sample of students, we report ‘confidence intervals’ around the results. These confidence intervals represent the possibility that if we had taken a different sample of students, we would get a slightly different result. The results show the changes in the expected percentage of students at and above the grade 7 and grade 4 boundaries, compared with 2017.

The NRT results are compared with 2017. This is the baseline year of the NRT, and, with the exception of 2021 and 2022, this is the year with which we have previously compared results.

The current versions of GCSEs in English language and maths were first awarded in 2017, and we know that when new assessments are available, performance typically

dips in the first year and then subsequently improves. This is known as the [sawtooth effect](#). When considering any changes in performance compared with 2017, we take into account any changes in performance that are typically observed when new qualifications are introduced, as we did when [making decisions about using the NRT in 2019](#) and [2020](#). For example, were we to see a significant increase in NRT performance compared with 2017, we would need to consider whether this reflected a genuine change in attainment.

The results for 2026 show that, in English, performance is statistically significantly lower at grade 4 (at the 0.01 level of significance) when compared with 2017.<sup>1</sup> There is no statistically significant difference at grade 7 when compared with 2017.

In maths, there is a statistically significant upward change at grade 7 compared with 2017 (at the 0.01 level of significance). There is no statistically significant difference at grade 4.

Expected percentage of students at each grade (with associated confidence intervals) based on NRT 2026

| <b>Subject</b>        | <b>Grade 4 and above</b> | <b>Grade 7 and above</b> |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| English language 2017 | 69.9 (68.3-71.5)         | 16.8 (15.6-18.0)         |
| English language 2026 | 66.1 (64.6-67.6)         | 17.6 (16.4-18.9)         |
| Maths 2017            | 70.7 (69.3-72.1)         | 19.9 (18.6-21.2)         |
| Maths 2026            | 71.6 (70.2-73.0)         | 23.9 (22.6-25.2)         |

## Using NRT evidence in awarding

The NRT provides an additional source of evidence to support the awarding of GCSEs in English language and maths. Where there is a statistically significant difference in performance, Ofqual can require exam boards to take the NRT evidence into account, to ensure that standards are maintained.

In order to help us interpret the NRT results, we carry out additional analyses to consider a number of factors that could potentially impact on the results of the NRT,

beyond genuine generalisable changes in the performance of the cohort. Similar to summer 2025, the analyses differed slightly this year due to the absence of key stage 2 data, typically used as a measure of prior attainment to consider any potential bias in the sample. In its place this year (and last), we considered the school-level recent prior achievement of those participating in the NRT compared to the national profile. We also consider the findings from the student survey in relation to student motivation and students' views of the importance of the NRT and GCSEs in English language or maths.

In considering the evidence from the NRT, we aim to make sure that:

- our decisions are consistent over time and between subjects, regardless of the direction of any change
- we take account of contextual evidence from the student survey and other sources, and that we act cautiously in making any decisions to make an adjustment
- we document and publish the reasons for our decisions

## **School sample**

In both English and maths, the mean GCSE performance of participating schools tended to show a slight under-representation of both schools with the very lowest and very highest recent prior achievement, compared to the national profile.

This is not, in itself, problematic, and similar variations are seen in the samples in previous years. In both NRT subjects, analysis shows that any bias relative to the national profile of schools is relatively stable across the iterations of the NRT, and modelling these effects shows that the subtle differences in profile compared to 2017 are not sufficient to explain any differences in performance on the tests.

## **Student survey**

Immediately after taking the NRT, students take a short survey to capture, among other things, their NRT-specific test motivation, preparation for GCSEs, and motivation, feelings and attitudes about learning the relevant GCSE subject. The aim of the survey is to provide context for any changes in NRT results. The survey was

introduced in 2017, and 2026 saw the 10th administration of the survey.

Compared to their counterparts in 2017, students taking the NRT in both subjects in 2026 reported lower test-taking effort, lower perceived importance of the NRT, greater indifference to their own NRT performance and less preparation for the NRT.

Modelling based on the historical relationship between self-reported test motivation and test performance suggests that, although reduced test motivation may explain part of the decline in English performance at grade 4 compared with 2017, it is not the principal cause of this statistically significant decrease. In mathematics, the modelling indicates that the statistically significant improvement in performance at grade 7 cannot be attributed to changes in test motivation.

## **Interpreting the results**

### **English**

The statistically significant difference at grade 4, compared with 2017, could be interpreted as suggesting that a small downward adjustment to GCSE English language might have been appropriate this summer. Our additional contextual analysis indicates that differences in the profile of the student sample and lower reported test motivation do not fully explain the decline in performance observed in 2026. However, we have always been clear that we would be cautious in using evidence from the NRT to inform awarding decisions.

While the NRT results provide some evidence consistent with a decline in performance relative to 2017, they do not demonstrate a clear and sustained trend over time.

We will continue to monitor trends in NRT performance over time and will be looking closely again at this next year. Should further evidence emerge to indicate a clear and sustained downward trend in attainment, then we would consider whether an adjustment is necessary to maintain standards.

# Maths

NRT performance at grade 7 has improved significantly since 2017, and by 1.3pp since 2019 by when we expect the qualification to have bedded in. Further, our contextual analyses suggest that the small differences in the profile of the student sample, and the changes in reported test motivation, do not account for the increase in performance at grade 7 in 2026. Having considered the evidence, any potential sawtooth effect in the first years of the NRT, and balanced the principles set out above, we think that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there is a genuine increase in attainment.

To ensure that standards are maintained over time, Ofqual required exam boards to take the NRT evidence into account when setting grade boundaries, resulting in boundaries that are lower than they otherwise would have been, across the upper grade range (grades 5-9). The exact changes in grade boundaries for each specification vary, in the normal way, based on the difficulty of this year's papers. This change results in slightly larger numbers of students achieving a higher grade than would have been the case without this adjustment, to reflect the increase in attainment.

In reaching this decision, we have considered that there has been a sustained trend of improving NRT performance at grade 7 in maths over time, as shown in the [NFER results digest](#). This improved NRT performance suggests an increase in attainment at grade 7, which is likely to be present across the upper grade range. We also considered our decision in the context of previous years, in line with our principle of ensuring consistency over time. In particular, we noted that no adjustment was made in 2019, 2024 or 2025, when NRT results were significantly higher than in 2017. In 2019, this was because we concluded that the increase relative to 2017 was likely due to the sawtooth effect impacting on NRT performance in the first year. In 2024 and 2025, we considered that there was not yet sufficient evidence of a sustained trend showing an increase in performance.

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