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**Designing a new assessment system:**  
key messages for policy makers



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**Since the late 1980s the National Curriculum assessment system in England has been centred around a suite of end of key stage tests in English, mathematics and science. These tests have been used for an increasing number of purposes, calling into question whether they can all be achieved with one set of tests.**

**The system is now going through a period of change, and there is a real opportunity to review what we hope to use assessments for, and select the most appropriate means of collecting the required information.**

**Five factors must be taken into account when designing a new assessment system.**

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**1**

### **Defining the purposes**

Being clear about the purposes for which assessment results will be used is essential to achieving the required outcomes. One model of assessment cannot effectively meet all possible purposes, and a new system could use a combination of models to meet the different objectives.

**2**

### **Different models serve different purposes**

It is likely that any revised system will use a combination of several models of assessment.

#### **External tests:**

Well-developed, external tests used with a whole cohort of pupils form a valuable and cost-effective strand of any assessment system because they:

- save time for teachers by ensuring that individual teachers are not developing their own tests
- ensure that the same standard is being applied across different schools
- provide reliable results about each pupil and
- ensure public confidence in the system.

#### **Teacher assessment:**

As with external tests, teacher assessment plays a useful role in any assessment system because it:

- provides specific feedback on the progress of individual pupils to feed into teaching and learning
- informs conversations with parents and pupils about individual strengths and weaknesses
- complements test results.

#### **National sample tests:**

Using tests with a sample of pupils, rather than a whole cohort, is an efficient and cost effective way of monitoring national standards over time in a low stakes way. As all pupils do not answer all the same questions, it is possible to cover a much broader range of the curriculum, and alternative forms of assessment - practical tests, group tasks or speaking and listening tests - can be used with some pupils. However, a national sample test cannot be used for collecting reliable information about the performance of pupils or schools.

### **International surveys:**

The UK aspires to have a world class education system and we need to know where we stand in relation to our economic competitors. Participation in international surveys such as Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Trends in International Maths and Science Survey (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) can provide the necessary comparison.

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## **3**

### **Teachers' expertise**

For any system to be effective, teachers must understand the purposes of the key components. It will be important to build the expertise of teachers so that they have a rounded understanding of assessment, and can make best use of different forms of evidence. Initial Teacher Education cannot devote the time required to develop this expertise, so much of the professional development will need to take place once teachers are in post. Moderation procedures of teacher assessment judgements or of teacher marking of externally set tests can provide one of the best means of developing assessment expertise.

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## **4**

### **High stakes accountability**

There is a consensus that accountability information about schools should be available for the system and its current and potential users. However, the use of any form of assessment results for high stakes accountability purposes is likely to distort how the assessment is used. If test results are used to judge schools, this could lead to an over-emphasis on success in the tests, at the expense of broader learning.

If teacher assessment is used, this puts the teachers in the position of making judgements against which they themselves may be judged.

Accountability systems need to be based on a broad range of measures, to ensure that assessment does not narrow the focus of teaching and learning. The measures need to take a range of contextual factors into account to enable fair comparisons to be made.

The principle of judging schools by the progress the pupils make is right, but it is essential to establish a method of doing this which serves the purposes of accountability while being fair to schools and pupils. This may involve measurement of pupils' progress from one attainment measure to another, or may involve comparison between a measure of their potential and a subsequent measurement of whether this potential has been reached.

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## **5**

### **Standards over time**

Comparisons over time are difficult. Where the assessment instruments used to measure change are themselves changed it becomes impossible to draw conclusions about whether standards have improved. Once decisions have been made about the purposes of a refined assessment system and the models that will be used to provide the necessary information, time must be allowed for the new system to bed down and for reliable data to be established and collected.

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