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Building towards the Curriculum & Assessment Review's Final Report

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It should be noted that this report reflects a range of discussions and views, and not necessarily the views of the authors.

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Introduction

In September 2024, the Government commissioned an independent Curriculum & Assessment Review to examine the National Curriculum to ensure it remains fit for purpose and delivers educational excellence for all. This marks over a decade since the curriculum offer was last reviewed. Earlier this year, the Review published its interim report¹, confirming its “evolution, not revolution” approach and stating that the current education system is working “relatively well”. However, the interim report identifies four key challenges that it says need to be addressed:

- ensuring high standards for all;
- responding to societal and technological change;
- getting 16-19 technical and vocational qualifications right; and
- subject-specific issues.

Cutting across these issues, the Review panel is continuing to seek input into several areas, two of which we address in this paper.

First, how to strike a balance between subject breadth and depth in the curriculum. This follows concerns of an overfull curriculum causing ‘teaching to the test’ and the hampering of teacher professionalism.

Second, how to improve inclusivity, particularly for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), while maintaining rigour.

In the summer of 2025, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) partnered with AQA to bring together expert stakeholders in two roundtables to examine these issues. This paper draws together reflections from those discussions. Participants explored what is needed from a reformed curriculum and assessment system in order to provide a rigorous, enriching curriculum without overburdening pupils or teachers. Our overarching question to participants was “how can we ensure all pupils, no matter their interests or circumstances, can thrive within the English education system?”.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review’s interim report found that “many of the challenges reported by stakeholders concern matters to do with practice, resourcing and implementation, rather than the content of the national curriculum and the effectiveness of the assessment system.” This was reflected throughout our discussions with stakeholders where it remains clear that separating reform of curriculum and assessment from the implementation challenges is difficult and, arguably, impossible. We therefore consider some of those implementation challenges in this paper and consider it to be an important feature of the review itself.

¹ Department for Education. 2025b. “Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report.” GOV.UK. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67e6b43596745eff958ca022/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_interim_report.pdf.

We are grateful to AQA for supporting this work and to all participants for their contributions.

This report, including recommendations, reflects a range of discussions and views, and does not necessarily represent the view of any participant in the roundtables, the authors of this report, AQA or of the Education Policy Institute.

Part 1: Finding the balance: breadth vs depth in curriculum and assessment reform



Finding the balance: breadth vs depth in curriculum and assessment reform

Our discussions with participants focused on the principles underpinning decisions on breadth versus depth, rather than on specific subject areas. Discussions also focused on curriculum, rather than assessment, while recognising the two are interlinked. Participants identified the question of breadth versus depth as a significant tension that the Curriculum & Assessment Review must seek to resolve.

Overall, participants felt that primary schools tend to have excellent curricula, in part because Ofsted focuses heavily on this area during inspection. There were, however, concerns that the curriculum across all phases, including primary, has become overcrowded.

System leaders cited the difficulties that teachers face in delivering new topics or projects, because of the time it takes to get through the content specifications of the national curriculum. This is despite the fact that the national curriculum is not intended to take up all lesson time, rather it purports to be “just one element in the education of every child” and that “there is time and space in the school day and in each week, term and year to range beyond the national curriculum specifications” for teachers to develop stimulating lessons based on the needs of their pupils.²

Citing the Rethinking Curriculum project led by the Chartered College of Teaching and UCL’s Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy, an in-school co-design pilot with primary schools to create curriculum development tools,³ one participant outlined how primaries involved in this project expressed their desire to further develop their curriculum, offer more choice and involve the local community to a greater extent. However, despite intensive support in the pilot phase, curriculum overload made this very challenging to achieve.

Participants generally expressed a preference to strip back the national primary curriculum to some extent or to offer teachers more flexibility over topic areas. When asked if there was consensus around the table over what should be removed from the primary curriculum, participants responded that no single subject should be removed, but rather there needs to be trimming across the board.

There was acknowledgement that curriculum overload varies by subject, so any reduction in content must be addressed on a subject-by-subject basis. There were particular concerns about secondary school teachers feeling overloaded when asked to teach subjects outside their area of specialism. This speaks to the need to ensure all teachers have access to subject-specific, high-

² Department for Education. 2013. “The National Curriculum in England Key Stages 1 and 2 Framework Document.” GOV.UK.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81a9abe5274a2e8ab55319/PRIMARY_national_curriculum.pdf.

³ Chartered College of Teaching. 2022. “Rethinking Curriculum.” Chartered College of Teaching. <https://chartered.college/rethinking-curriculum/>.

quality continuous professional development (CPD) material and have the capacity to undertake this training regularly.

Overall, participants felt that any decisions about reforming the curriculum in one phase, must also consider the implications on other phases. There was acknowledgement that the transition from primary to secondary is already challenging for many pupils and those challenges may be exacerbated if there is not a continuum to the curriculum.

The 16-19 phase was a key area of interest identified in the Curriculum & Assessment Review's Interim Report. Addressing this, participants noted that there is a lack of engaging vocational options in the pre-16 phase, which then makes choosing vocational options post-GCSE more difficult. There were concerns that the pre-16 phase is characterised by a narrow view of success that prioritises English and mathematics above other creative and vocational subjects.

Participants acknowledged that the focus on English and maths has merit, but some also highlighted that such an approach, where an increasing amount of attention is spent on core subjects through repetition of material, may also lead to children feeling frustrated, becoming disengaged and eventually stop showing up to school at all. They suggested that vocational and creative subjects can play a role in keeping pupils involved in their studies.

One participant suggested this stemmed from the changes made after the last National Curriculum Review in 2010 which, when implemented in 2014, reduced the number of available technical qualifications pre-16, resulting in it being more difficult to achieve parity of esteem between academic and vocational courses.

Participants noted that there is a genuine demand in schools for KS3 and 4 vocational options. They agreed that greater ambition is needed to enable all pupils to experience a sense of ownership of success in their education, and celebrating different pathways, such as Functional Skills, is one way in which mainstream schools could learn from the specialist sector. With adequate funding, alternative pathways could enable pupils to study a broader range of subjects, such as engineering or performance arts, in a way that is engaging and motivating.

Equally, concerns were expressed that this approach can risk certain groups of pupils being marginalised or limited from taking particular pathways. Factors including teacher bias and accountability arrangements can contribute to a two-tier system between academic and technical pathways. However, with proper ambition, it was suggested that pre-16 pathways could offer an alternative route or supplement GCSEs to increase access to post-16 pathways, including T-Levels and apprenticeships. Financial education was cited as a supplementary subject that could be made available at this earlier stage, supporting pupils to study a broader range of subjects while engaging core subjects such as mathematics.

Recommendations from participants:

- Ensure teachers have access to subject-specific, high-quality CPD material and have the capacity to undertake training regularly, potentially using 'bitesize' training

- Reduce curriculum content on a subject-by-subject basis
- Quick wins:
 - Reduce the significantly overloaded appendices in the English curriculum
 - Reduce the number of topics in the history curriculum
 - Consider moving some of the grammar content to KS3 so there is more continuity in learning and less pressure to teach it all as it is tested in the SATs
- Provide high-level guidance on what percentage of teaching time the national curriculum should take up overall, though not at a subject or topic level, which may impede teacher flexibility and curriculum adaptability.
- Provide funding for creative and vocational pre-16 pathways that incorporate core subjects, such as English and mathematics, while engaging broader interests

The impact of AI and digital technologies on curriculum and assessment

The Curriculum & Assessment Review’s Interim Report identifies the need for the curriculum to respond to social and technological change, highlighting that: “attention is needed to address opportunities and challenges created by our fast-changing world. The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and trends in digital information demand heightened media literacy and critical thinking, as well as digital skills.”⁴

The Department for Education (DfE) is also investing heavily in digital solutions. In early 2025, the Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson MP, announced the “take up [of] this great new technological era to modernise our education system, to back our teachers and to deliver better life chances for our children across the country.”⁵ Announcements include an EdTech Evidence Board, led by the Chartered College of Teaching, which will explore how to effectively build evidence of AI products that work well and a ‘content store’ pilot⁶ that pools Government documents including curriculum guidance, lesson plans and anonymised pupil assessments to be used by AI companies to train their tools to generate more accurate, high-quality content.

Participants considered two questions relating to AI and digital skills: “where do digital skills fit in the curriculum?” and “what can technology offer to solve some of the issues identified in the curriculum and assessment system?”.

⁴Department for Education. 2025b. “Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report.” GOV.UK. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67e6b43596745eff958ca022/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_interim_report.pdf.

⁵ Department for Education. 2025a. “Education Secretary Outlines Plans to Modernise Education Sector.” GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-outlines-plans-to-modernise-education-sector>.

⁶ Department for Education. 2025d. “Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Education”. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/generative-artificial-intelligence-in-education/generative-artificial-intelligence-ai-in-education>.

While there was agreement that the development of digital skills should be a priority to support young people to be successful in the workplace, participants also agreed that the current curriculum does not always support the development of digital fluency.^{7,8} It can be challenging to identify where digital skills fit and embed their development in the current curriculum in a consistent manner, as they span multiple subjects.

Participants emphasised the need for greater critical understanding of the digital world including data commercialisation and safety, as opposed to more straightforward topics such as how to use certain devices or technological tools. Moreover, participants also noted how technology increasingly facilitates creativity and that, many young people now express their creativity in the digital sphere. It was felt that supporting children to develop and communicate their creativity using digital tools may be a useful avenue to better embed the development of digital fluency across the curriculum.

There was acknowledgement that AI has a role to play in supporting formative assessment through testing that responds and evolves according to the responses of the pupil and participants also highlighted the value of programmes that support the teaching of specific aspects of the curriculum, such as learning times tables. However, this came with caveats that while children can enjoy the gamification aspect of these programmes, this can impact expectations of what learning feels like and caution that a whole subject curriculum cannot and should not be delivered this way. EdTech programmes often presume that learning will take place individually yet group cooperation is a pedagogical approach that has been linked to the development of social skills and improved wellbeing.⁹ If EdTech tools are rolled out more widely without due attention paid to how they impact on pedagogy, there is a risk that collaborative and group learning will be reduced.

Some participants appreciated that the Government is leading the ‘content store’ pilot, which aims to improve the quality of the underpinning content and data needed for effective AI tools. The risk of transferring flaws of generative AI, including hallucinations and bias, to teaching materials was also mentioned. Participants highlighted the need to engage teacher expertise in the creation of any new materials.

Finally, participants discussed the risk that increased use of AI and other EdTech could increase the disadvantage gap through disparate access to tools or knowledge, whereby for example a child who has been taught to use a tool such as ChatGPT and evaluate its outcomes can generate high-quality revision material through appropriate prompts whereas a child who has not will be left with less useful information.

⁷ Cain and Coldwell-Neilson. 2024. “Digital Fluency – a Dynamic Capability Continuum.” *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 40 (1). <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.8363>.

⁸ Digital fluency is defined as contextualised, knowledge-based behaviours that enable adaptive and successful engagement in dynamic digital worlds.

⁹ Shvets et al. 2024. “Enhancing Students’ Social Abilities via Cooperative Learning and Project-Based Teaching Methods: Pedagogical Approaches and Beneficial Outcomes.” *Multidisciplinary Reviews* 7 (June): 2024spe022. <https://doi.org/10.31893/multirev.2024spe022>.

Ultimately, participants felt that while technology offers exciting opportunities, much more evidence is needed to understand how it can be embedded effectively within individual classrooms and rolled out equitably across the country, regardless of a school's circumstances.

Recommendations from participants:

- Provide pupils with a greater critical understanding of the digital world including data commercialisation and safety
- Embed the development of digital fluency across the curriculum - pupils should be supported to develop and communicate their creativity using digital tools
- Continue to explore AI supporting formative assessment through testing that responds and evolves according to the responses of the pupil
- Prioritise collaborative and group learning pedagogies alongside EdTech tools to avoid the decline of social skills and wellbeing
- Policies should address inequality in digital access so that AI and other EdTech do not increase the disadvantage gap
- Increase the quality of the evidence base through further research to make informed decisions regarding AI and other EdTech

Making the best use of resources and available data to support curriculum development and adaptation

Participants also considered how learning materials more widely could support curriculum development and adaptation. It was suggested that high-quality learning materials may be a useful step for ensuring consistent standards without the Government being overly prescriptive.

One participant cited the example of Singapore where teachers flexibly use state approved textbooks from a variety of publishers. These textbooks outline the content to be delivered in a lesson or a block of time with continuous internal assessment at the end of each module. The continuous assessment aspect of these materials was felt to be critical; the absence of which was felt to be an issue in the English system.

There was acknowledgement about the different ways in which curriculum materials are used in Singapore compared to England, as well as the risk that increasing reliance on such materials could result in the deskilling of teachers. To address this, participants felt that there should be more signposting from the Government on high-quality, trusted materials. This could support curriculum coherence and continuity, particularly for teachers who are being asked to teach subjects outside their specialism, while ensuring they have the flexibility to meet diverse student needs.

England's rich data landscape was also considered. Although there are challenges, we are now in a better position to identify disadvantage pupils as well as those who are underperforming. It was

felt that greater use of available data in schools would help to identify topics with which individuals or cohorts struggle, for example through the question-level analysis tool available in the DfE's Analyse School Performance tool. One participant from a Multi-Academy Trust mentioned that they use this data to look at the incoming Year 7 cohort data and adapt the curriculum accordingly. Scotland and Wales provide free digital tests to schools for their pupils aged 9-14. The data is shared only with teachers and is not used for accountability purposes, except at an aggregate level (rather than on a school-by-school basis). Again, it was felt this could be a useful example that might help school leaders and teachers tailor areas of the curriculum which require more focus.

These examples also speak to the strong feeling amongst participants that the transition from primary to secondary is a particularly difficult period where pupils often become disengaged. Improved usage of data and available evidence, leading to better-adapted curricula, could help with this.

Recommendations:

- Dedicate resources to signposting high-quality, trusted material to support curriculum coherence and continuity, while maintaining flexibility
- Increase teacher capacity to access CPD on curriculum development so that they have the expertise to develop and adapt resources
- Prioritise resource guidance for teachers who are working outside of their subject expertise
- Encourage schools to make use of available data to tailor the curriculum, for example through the question-level analysis tool available in the DfE's Analyse School Performance tool

Opportunities for continued curriculum updates

Participants suggested it was important to consider the policy instruments available that allow for continued direction from national Government while allowing institutions to choose what is best for their pupils. In practice, this requires the DfE to be clear on the types of qualifications both available and necessary for progression onto given routes from which schools and colleges can then choose according to the needs of their pupils. Moreover, participants felt the Department can then make use of levers including Ofsted, specific accountability measures such as Progress 8 and targeted funding to encourage schools to choose certain options according to feedback from stakeholders such as parents and higher education institutions and the requirements of the future workforce. Ultimately, it was felt that, in conjunction with the Review, the Department must identify appropriate policy instruments for the continuous management of the breadth and depth of subject content.

Recommendations from participants:

- Clearly communicate the types of qualifications available for schools and colleges to make informed choices according to the needs of their pupils
- Make use of levers to direct funding according to feedback from stakeholders and the requirements of the future workforce

Part 2: Investigating inclusive curriculum and assessment practices

Investigating inclusive curriculum and assessment practices

The second part of this paper synthesises the discussion on creating an inclusive curriculum for all children and young people, with a particular focus on those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

EPI research finds that children with SEND have significant attainment gaps: in 2024, for children on SEN support, the gap was the equivalent of 21.8 months of learning by age 16 and for children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), the gap was over three years (39.6 months) prior attainment is a significant contributing factor to the widening of the gap as a child progresses through school.¹⁰

Given that as many as four in ten pupils are identified as having SEND at some point between the ages of five and 16, and a disproportionate number of those pupils also experience other disadvantages, it is critical to consider what policy levers are available to support early identification and intervention to ensure these pupils receive the support they need.¹¹

The Curriculum & Assessment Review is one such policy lever that can contribute to positive changes and a narrowing of these gaps. As the interim report highlights, many of the drivers of the gaps, and their solutions, lie outside the purview of the Curriculum and Assessment system. However, the report confirms that the Review will take steps to ensure the system “reflects high expectations for all, and properly supports the progress and achievement of all young people.”¹² Alongside the Review it was announced last year that a £740 million capital investment would be set aside to create more specialist places for children with SEND in mainstream schools. The Schools White Paper, expected in Autumn 2025, will continue the strong focus on SEND reform to tackle the serious challenges facing the system.¹³

Defining inclusivity

The need to define what is meant by ‘inclusion’ was highlighted by participants as key as there is currently a lack of shared understanding about how to approach inclusion in mainstream schools, and current practices are therefore highly varied. It was felt this lack of coherence is visible across national frameworks, such as the Initial Teacher Training and Ofsted frameworks, which use varying definitions.

¹⁰ Hunt et al. 2025. “Breaking down the Gap.” Education Policy Institute. <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Breaking-down-the-gap.pdf>.

¹¹ Education Policy Institute. 2025. “Annual Report 2025: SEND.” Education Policy Institute. <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2025-send/>.

¹² Department for Education. 2025b. “Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report.” GOV.UK. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67e6b43596745eff958ca022/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_interim_report.pdf.

¹³ Department for Education. 2024. “New Specialist Places to Be Created in Mainstream Schools.” GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-specialist-places-to-be-created-in-mainstream-schools>.

While participants acknowledged that no framework can mention every single group or need type, this lack of shared understanding does make it more difficult for schools.

Research conducted by education charity The Difference was cited as a potential starting point to develop a definition. It states that “Whole school inclusion means all staff supporting the learning, wellbeing and safety needs of all children, so that they belong, achieve and thrive.”¹⁴

This definition of inclusivity aims to create a universal approach that centres pupils with higher needs so that they can access the same entitlements as their peers. The Disabled Children’s Partnership’s ‘Fight for Ordinary’ campaign ¹⁵ was also cited as a useful framework for inclusive curriculum design. It emphasises that children with SEND and their families want the same fundamental things as all families: educational settings where children are happy, belong, and achieve; opportunities for friendships and activities; necessary healthcare support; and parental support that enables work-life balance without excessive advocacy battles.

An inclusive offer in a mainstream school would ensure that the provision is already available for a child to access. Participants suggested that support should be available based on evidence of need, rather than only becoming available after a diagnosis. Children can experience many adversities, particularly in their adolescence, which can affect their response to education. While in many cases a diagnosis is certainly necessary, ensuring that early support is available could help to meet the needs of those children and counter issues with waiting times within the stretched system, whether or not a diagnosis is later deemed appropriate.

Some participants also highlighted the value of trauma-informed approaches and supporting a sense of belonging across all aspects of school life. Belonging is broadly defined in education literature as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment.”¹⁶ Research on school belonging has emerged as an important area of enquiry because of the significant impact on academic achievement, psychological well-being and social development. Empirical evidence highlights that a substantial proportion of students worldwide report low levels of school belonging, which correlates with adverse outcomes such as disengagement and mental health issues.¹⁷ Such approaches can play a key role in inclusive practice however participants noted the need for further guidance from the Department to fully embed them across the system.

¹⁴ Simpson and O’Brien. 2025. “What Works: Four Tenets of Effective Internal Alternative Provision.” The Difference. <https://the-difference.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/What-Works-Four-Tenets-of-Effective-Internal-Alternative-Provision.pdf>.

¹⁵ Disabled Children’s Partnership. 2025. “Children and Young People with Special Educational.” Disabled Children’s Partnership. <https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Fight-For-Ordinary-report.pdf>.

¹⁶ Goodenow and Grady. 2010. “The Relationship of School Belonging and Friends’ Values to Academic Motivation among Urban Adolescent Students.” *The Journal of Experimental Education* 62 (1): 60–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1993.9943831>.

¹⁷ Allen et al. 2024. “Adolescent School Belonging and Mental Health Outcomes in Young Adulthood: Findings from a Multi-Wave Prospective Cohort Study.” *School Mental Health* 16 (January). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-023-09626-6>.

Finally, for inclusion to be embedded, it needs to be both possible, meaning teachers have the required resources, capacity and knowledge, and desirable, meaning schools are not penalised by the accountability system. The impacts of the accountability system are explored further below.

Recommendations from participants:

- Work towards a shared understanding of inclusion and how it is defined and adopted by all key stakeholders, including mainstream schools, ITE providers and Ofsted
- Encourage schools to consider implementing a universal approach to inclusion that centres pupils with higher needs, so that they can access the same entitlements as their peers
- Increased funding for early support and identification, including access to specialist services

What does an inclusive curriculum and assessment system look like?

Participants acknowledged that discussions on inclusive curriculum often focus on subject content and the attainment of qualifications. This narrow focus can lead pupils, particularly those with more complex needs, to miss out on breadth and the richness of a full education. Participants noted that there will always be children who struggle to access the national curriculum, so defining the purpose of education and ensuring that all children can experience this purpose is critical.

In the first instance, participants felt that children facing the biggest barriers need the highest level of support. It was agreed that timetabling should start by considering these children first.

Participants also called for more widespread and accepted use of reasonable adjustments.^{18,19}

Examples of adaptations might include timetable and uniform adjustments, access to a support worker, accessible learning materials, flexible seating arrangements, quiet space access, access arrangements during exams and adaptations to behaviour policies. What is considered “reasonable” is not defined in legislation and adjustments are decided on a case-by-case basis by schools depending on the cost and effectiveness of the adjustment, the impact on other pupils, health and safety requirements and the school's overall budget and resources. Reasonable adjustments can be made at the discretion of teachers and schools to support learning without waiting for a diagnosis. However, there is a common misconception that reasonable adjustments can only be made for children with EHCPs. This misinformation should be addressed to support awareness of adaptations teachers can make at early stages when there is evidence of need.

In terms of curriculum content, participants put forward several suggestions to support inclusion. This included streamlining content to allow for more time for learning and support and introducing better content alignment across subjects, for example, the same mathematical

¹⁸ GOV.UK. 2013. “Equality Act 2010.” GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>.

¹⁹ Reasonable adjustments are required under the Equality Act 2010 which was “designed to address the disadvantage and discrimination experienced by particular groups of people and to provide a legal framework for addressing these inequalities.”

specification across maths, science, and geography to support the carryover of knowledge and greater opportunities for practice and mastery of concepts.

Participants cited two main assessment challenges. First, addressing accessibility issues in current assessments by using universal design principles²⁰. Digital tools have a great deal to offer through straightforward enlargement of texts or differentiated font and image colours. Extra time is the most commonly used form of reasonable adjustment for assessments, but for extra time to be an effective leveller, parents must be brought on board and children need guidance on how to make the best use of this time. Efforts should also be made to reduce any associated stigma e.g. having to stay behind or sit in a separate part of the exam hall. Participants suggested that mock exams could be used as practice for how to use extra time effectively and if possible, within timetabling arrangements. Extra time should not eat into a child's break time so they are not penalised for their need.

Finally, participants felt that the language used around assessments, particularly in primary, could be improved; rather than a child being 'behind' or 'below' a certain fixed point, it would be useful to discuss results in terms of progress made, particularly for internal assessments, so students can enjoy a sense of achievement and remain engaged in their education.

Secondly, the question of whether the current assessment system itself is flexible enough to cater to all needs. Formal exams are, for the most part, handwritten and take place for all pupils at the same time within an exam hall. Participants discussed how technology could facilitate individual testing when a child is deemed ready by their teacher, as a way to reduce stressors and meet pupil needs. However, they recognised that this would have to be carefully monitored to ensure the continued validity and reliability of assessments. Any movement away from the traditional exam system may lead to push back from the sector, parents and employers. However, it was suggested that a less high-stakes system that allows for piloting new approaches and evidence generation would be useful to work out the best course of reform.

As a starting point, participants felt it would be valuable to reduce the number of hours of end-point assessment at KS4 and 5 and introduce more non-examined assessments in practical subjects.

Recommendations from participants:

- Strip back content to allow for more time for learning and support
- Better align content across subjects to support mastery of concepts
- Quick wins:
 - Using digital tools to enlarge texts or differentiated font and image colours

²⁰ Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. 2025. "The 7 Principles." Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. <https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design/the-7-principles>.

- Guidance on how to make the best use of extra time, alongside SENCOs making parents and children aware of the range of access arrangements available to them as extra time may not always be the most effective in meeting the child's needs
- Improved language around assessments
- Improve flexibility in the assessment system to allow for piloting new approaches and generating evidence without schools/teachers being penalised
- Reduce the number of hours of end-point assessment at KS4 and 5 and introduce more non-examined assessments in practical subjects

Systemic barriers: teacher training, funding and capacity within the system

The Government is calling on mainstream schools to support higher levels of need and retain special school places for children with the most complex requirements but participants felt it was critical to be really honest about the thresholds of complexity that mainstream schools will be asked to support; for example, instructing a diverse classroom is highly challenging because the pace of instruction can vary for pupils with different needs. As a minimum, participants highlighted that much greater support and training for teachers is required. Teachers are already under significant strain with high workloads and reports of deeply concerning levels of poor wellbeing.²¹ Therefore, making sure there is capacity and funding available to release teachers for training, without adding extra burdens, is key. Participants suggested it would be useful to identify a critical body of knowledge that all teachers should be equipped with to widen their toolkit and facilitate inclusive practice, but training must also interlock with existing school policies and practices to be effective.

There is also a need to boost parental confidence in the system. Participants suggested families now feel that EHCPs are the only avenue to access support and are having to undergo lengthy proceedings to secure the adjustments their child requires. IFS research shows that the number of school pupils with EHCPs increased by 180,000 or 71% between 2018 and 2024.²² This rise in EHCPs has left local authority budgets in crisis: deficits are estimated to total £4.6 billion despite a 58% increase in the Department for Education's high needs funding over the last decade.²³

However, schools and colleges cannot solve the issues within the SEND system alone, and wider issues outside of the control of the education system were discussed as areas which could make a positive difference. For the Government's goal to be achieved and for all children to thrive, these areas, where they relate to SEND reform, should be considered in the upcoming Schools White Paper. This includes increasing and facilitating easy access to local specialist support and

²¹ Education Support. 2024. "Teacher Wellbeing Index 2024." Education Support. <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/ftwl04cs/twix-2024.pdf>.

²² Sibieta and Snape. 2024. "Spending on Special Educational Needs in England: Something Has to Change | Institute for Fiscal Studies." Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/spending-special-educational-needs-england-something-has-change>.

²³ Public Accounts Committee. 2025. "Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs." [Committees.parliament.uk.https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/46238/documents/231788/default/](https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/46238/documents/231788/default/).

prioritising early intervention, particularly for need types such as social, emotional and mental health and speech, language and communication needs where early intervention can make a material difference and lessen the likelihood of more severe problems later in a child's education. The Government has invested £500 million to roll out Best Start Hubs²⁴ to support families with preschool age children including through support for language and emotional development. Participants were positive about the potential for of these hubs to reduce strain in the system and facilitate early intervention.

Ultimately, participants called for increased investment and emphasised the impacts of rising child poverty on increasing levels of need²⁵ within the system; strategies to tackle child poverty are a critical accompaniment to any reforms to the SEND system.

Recommendations from participants:

- Develop a core knowledge framework that equips all teachers with essential inclusive practice skills
- Provide dedicated funding to release teachers for SEND training without increasing workloads
- Ensure training integrates with existing school policies rather than creating additional bureaucracy
- Increase transparency about the complexity thresholds that mainstream schools will be expected to support
- Rebuild parental confidence by creating alternative pathways to support beyond EHCPs that prioritise early intervention, where impact is greatest
- Tackle child poverty as a fundamental driver of increased SEND needs and ensure cross departmental working to address wider services which support SEND

²⁴ Department for Education. 2025c. "Government Revives Family Services, Supporting 500,000 More Kids." GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-revives-family-services-supporting-500000-more-kids>.

²⁵ Shaw et al. 2016. "Special Educational Needs and Their Links to Poverty." Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/special-educational-needs-and-their-links-to-poverty>.

Part 3: The impacts of the accountability system on curriculum and assessment

The impacts of the accountability system on curriculum and assessment

Significant parts of both discussions focused on the impact of the accountability system on curriculum and assessment.

As well as widely understood issues associated with the accountability system such as curriculum narrowing, participants identified a significant challenge in the current lack of cohesion and sequencing between Ofsted and the Department for Education. While the policy sector is very focused on the Curriculum & Assessment Review, and understandably so given its importance, school leaders are reporting greater interest and concern over how Ofsted will inspect the quality of curriculum and teaching. Significantly, participants highlighted the potential misalignment between the publication of the new Ofsted framework²⁶ in September 2025 and the later publication of the Curriculum & Assessment Review's Final Report. The misaligned timing means schools and colleges will then have to make sense of the new framework in light of the Government's response to the Final Report's recommendations, rather than responding to a Framework that takes into account the findings of this report. In essence, it was felt the cart was being put before the horse.

International evidence suggests that high-performing education systems maintain rigorous standards not just for schools, but for their accountability frameworks themselves. These systems regularly evaluate whether their accountability measures actually drive good teaching practices and support the wellbeing of both teachers and pupils.

However, some argue that this approach has broken down in England. Participants highlighted that accountability measures—particularly in primary schools—have created unintended consequences that go far beyond their original purpose. Instead of supporting educational improvement, they purport that the current system has distorted teaching practices and increased pressure on schools.

Participants argued that an effective accountability system should focus on supporting learning, identifying excellent practice, and sharing what works across schools. Rather than simply testing and ranking schools, accountability should be a tool for improvement.

There was also agreement that accountability can act as a barrier to inclusivity. The use of attainment and progress data by Ofsted and the DfE in taking decisions about inspection outcomes and intervention can disincentivise school leaders from putting in place more inclusive practices.

Recommendations from participants:

²⁶ Ofsted. 2025b. "Education Inspection Framework: For Use from November 2025". <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework/education-inspection-framework-for-use-from-november-2025>.

- Improve coordination between Ofsted and the DfE to eliminate mixed messages and conflicting priorities for schools
- Introduce regular evaluation of accountability measures following international best practice, to assess whether current measures drive good teaching and support wellbeing
- Adapt accountability measures so schools aren't discouraged from being more inclusive due to fears about performance outcomes
- Separate inclusion from attainment metrics so distinct measures can be used to recognise schools serving diverse populations
- Incentivise inclusive leadership by ensuring headteachers feel supported rather than penalised when making inclusive decisions
- Enhance Ofsted's role in identifying and disseminating effective practices across the system

What is needed from accountability reform?

Within the context of these discussions, participants considered how to reform accountability to promote inclusion and flexibility and teacher agency regarding curriculum and assessment choices. Incorporating measures such as belonging and well-being, similar to the #BeeWell project,²⁷ could help to create balance in the accountability system. Additionally, reforms should allow for more time for teachers to become familiar with a new curriculum and for changes to become embedded, as results can temporarily dip during this phase. Individual cases should also be evaluated more closely to determine whether resources are being used to support those most in need, even if this is not reflected in the school's achievement through assessment results.

A case sampling approach is a possible alternative that could be used to implement such reforms. In school inspections, this would involve examining a subset of pupil cases to assess the overall quality of services and support provided by a school. This is a targeted method that allows inspectors to focus on specific areas and evaluate the impact of interventions on individual experiences. This approach is already used for Local Area SEND inspections, whereby Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) jointly conduct inspections to evaluate how effectively local authorities and their partners, including Integrated Care Boards, work together to support children and young people with SEND.²⁸

A case sampling approach could also provide greater insight into the material impact of policy on pupil and school outcomes. It could supplement accountability measures, such as Progress 8, which analyses the differences in GCSE attainment of pupils who achieved similar grades at the end of primary. Looking at individual cases, for example, could reveal whether the measures taken

²⁷ #BeeWell. 2024. "Home - #BeeWell." #BeeWell. <https://beewellprogramme.org/>.

²⁸ GOV.UK. 2025. "Area SEND Inspections: Framework and Handbook." GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/area-send-framework-and-handbook/area-send-inspections-framework-and-handbook>.

improved school attendance, reduced suspensions or increased access to university or college places for further study. Moving to a three-year rolling average on Progress 8 could also mean that decisions made in one year, such as changing the curriculum, would have less of an impact if there is a temporary dip in results. This would grant teachers the space and flexibility to adapt their practice to the needs of their pupils, without fear that it could result in a low Ofsted grade.

Recommendations from participants:

- Incorporate belonging and wellbeing measures to balance academic outcomes in school evaluations
- Extend transition periods to give schools adequate time for new curricula to become embedded
- Move to three-year rolling averages for Progress 8 to reduce year-on-year pressure and allow for curriculum experimentation, without teachers fearing inspection consequences
- Adopt targeted inspection methods that examine specific pupil cases to assess the quality of support and interventions, similar to Local Area SEND inspections
- Evaluate individual impact and how well schools support their most vulnerable pupils, even if this doesn't show in overall achievement data
- Supplement existing measures using case sampling alongside Progress 8 to provide richer insight into school effectiveness

Conclusion

As the Curriculum & Assessment Review prepares its final recommendations to share with Government, it is clear that wider investment and reform is needed to ensure that the recommendations can be implemented effectively. From challenges recruiting and retaining staff to teach a breadth of subjects, to an accountability system that can penalise creative curriculum adaption and inclusive practice and a SEND system that struggles to keep up with rising need, participants called for more joined-up thinking across DfE policy areas and Ofsted to ensure that the new curriculum will be able to support children to thrive. As well as a better working relationship between the DfE and Ofsted, other Government departments need to also play their role in ensuring public services and funding are targeted to the children and families who are most in need.

In relation to the curriculum and assessment system specifically, unnecessary content should be stripped back and teachers should be given the freedom to adapt what they teach to their pupils' needs. Participants agreed that digital technologies have a lot to offer but more evidence is needed on their accessibility and impact across the system to ensure that these technologies help to close the disadvantage gap, rather than widen it.

There was a strong desire for schools to be ambitious in their inclusion strategies; to consider meeting needs first rather than waiting for diagnoses and for the DfE and Ofsted to lead, support and reward these efforts.

Full list of recommendations from participants:

Striking the balance: subject breadth vs depth

- Ensure teachers have access to subject-specific, high-quality CPD material and have the capacity to undertake training regularly, potentially using 'bitesize' training
- Reduce curriculum content on a subject-by-subject basis
- Quick wins:
 - Reduce the significantly overloaded appendices in the English curriculum
 - Reduce the number of topics in the history curriculum
 - Consider moving some of the grammar content to KS3 so there is more continuity in learning and less pressure to teach it all as it is tested in the SATs
- Provide high-level guidance on what percentage of teaching time the national curriculum should take up overall, though not at a subject or topic level, which may impede teacher flexibility and curriculum adaptability.

- Provide funding for creative and vocational pre-16 pathways that incorporate core subjects, such as English and mathematics, while engaging broader interests

The impact of AI and digital technologies on curriculum and assessment

- Provide pupils with a greater critical understanding of the digital world including data commercialisation and safety
- Embed the development of digital fluency across the curriculum - pupils should be supported to develop and communicate their creativity using digital tools
- Continue to explore AI supporting formative assessment through testing that responds and evolves according to the responses of the pupil
- Prioritise collaborative and group learning pedagogies alongside EdTech tools to avoid the decline of social skills and wellbeing
- Policies should address inequality in digital access so that AI and other EdTech do not increase the disadvantage gap
- Increase the quality of the evidence base through further research to make informed decisions regarding AI and other EdTech

Making the best use of resources and available data to support curriculum development and adaptation

- Dedicate resources to signposting high-quality, trusted material to support curriculum coherence and continuity, while maintaining flexibility
- Increase teacher capacity to access CPD on curriculum development so that they have the expertise to develop and adapt resources
- Prioritise resource guidance for teachers who are working outside of their subject expertise
- Encourage schools to make use of available data to tailor the curriculum, for example through the question-level analysis tool available in the DfE's Analyse School Performance tool

Opportunities for continued curriculum updates

- Clearly communicate the types of qualifications available for schools and colleges to make informed choices according to the needs of their pupils
- Make use of levers to direct funding according to feedback from stakeholders and the requirements of the future workforce

Defining inclusivity

- Work towards a shared understanding of inclusion and how it is defined and adopted by all key stakeholders, including mainstream schools, ITE providers and Ofsted
- Encourage schools to consider implementing a universal approach to inclusion that centres pupils with higher needs, so that they can access the same entitlements as their peers
- Increased funding for early support and identification, including access to specialist services

What does an inclusive curriculum and assessment system look like?

- Strip back content to allow for more time for learning and support
- Better align content across subjects to support mastery of concepts
- Quick wins:
 - Using digital tools to enlarge texts or differentiated font and image colours
 - Guidance on how to make the best use of extra time, alongside SENCOs making parents and children aware of the range of access arrangements available to them as extra time may not always be the most effective in meeting the child's needs
 - Improved language around assessments
- Improve flexibility in the assessment system to allow for piloting new approaches and generating evidence without schools/teachers being penalised
- Reduce the number of hours of end-point assessment at KS4 and 5 and introduce more non-examined assessments in practical subjects

Systemic barriers: teacher training, funding and capacity within the system

- Develop a core knowledge framework that equips all teachers with essential inclusive practice skills
- Provide dedicated funding to release teachers for SEND training without increasing workloads
- Ensure training integrates with existing school policies rather than creating additional bureaucracy
- Increase transparency about the complexity thresholds that mainstream schools will be expected to support
- Rebuild parental confidence by creating alternative pathways to support beyond EHCPs that prioritise early intervention, where impact is greatest

- Tackle child poverty as a fundamental driver of increased SEND needs and ensure cross departmental working to address wider services which support SEND

The impacts of the accountability system on curriculum and assessment

- Improve coordination between Ofsted and the DfE to eliminate mixed messages and conflicting priorities for schools
- Introduce regular evaluation of accountability measures following international best practice, to assess whether current measures drive good teaching and support wellbeing
- Adapt accountability measures so schools aren't discouraged from being more inclusive due to fears about performance outcomes
- Separate inclusion from attainment metrics so distinct measures can be used to recognise schools serving diverse populations
- Incentivise inclusive leadership by ensuring headteachers feel supported rather than penalised when making inclusive decisions
- Enhance Ofsted's role in identifying and disseminating effective practices across the system

What is needed from accountability reform?

- Incorporate belonging and wellbeing measures to balance academic outcomes in school evaluations
- Extend transition periods to give schools adequate time for new curricula to become embedded
- Move to three-year rolling averages for Progress 8 to reduce year-on-year pressure and allow for curriculum experimentation, without teachers fearing inspection consequences
- Adopt targeted inspection methods that examine specific pupil cases to assess the quality of support and interventions, similar to Local Area SEND inspections
- Evaluate individual impact and how well schools support their most vulnerable pupils, even if this doesn't show in overall achievement data
- Supplement existing measures using case sampling alongside Progress 8 to provide richer insight into school effectiveness

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