

**House of Commons Education Committee inquiry into primary assessment**  
**Written evidence submitted by SCHOOLS NorthEast**

**Executive summary**

- There are significant concerns among school leaders as to whether the current system of primary assessment is fit for purpose.
- More clarity is needed on exactly what the Government considers the purpose of primary assessment to be, and how this relates to accountability and the transition to secondary school.
- School leaders recognise that assessment plays a vital role in primary education.
- The majority of North East school leaders that we consulted reported that recent changes to primary assessment have had a negative impact on teaching and learning in their schools.
- The delivery of SATs during the last academic year was poorly managed and undermined confidence in the assessments.
- Teachers and school leaders would welcome further support on designing and implementing effective assessment systems.
- SCHOOLS NorthEast welcomes the announcement on primary assessment made by the Secretary of State on 19 October.

**About SCHOOLS NorthEast**

1. Set up by schools for schools, SCHOOLS NorthEast is the first and only school-led regional network in the UK. Governed by our 14 Trustees and 28 strong board – all of them serving school leaders in the region – we are the representative voice of the 1,250 schools in the North East.
2. As a school-led organisation, we are guided in all the work we do by the needs and concerns of our region’s schools. Primary assessment is one such concern. Indeed, when the Secretary of State for Education spoke to 450 school leaders from across the region at our annual Summit on 13 October, issues around primary assessment were raised repeatedly.
3. We therefore welcome the launch of this enquiry and are keen that the voice of North East primary schools is heard in this debate.
4. The following submission is based on consultation with schools from across the 12 local authority areas that constitute the North East region. School leaders and teachers from across the region raised a number of concerns about the impact of recent changes to primary assessment:
  - Narrowing of primary curriculum, leaving less time and space for certain subjects.
  - Teachers increasingly having to “teach to the test” at the expense of providing a broader education.
  - Increased stress among both pupils and teachers.
  - Potential to increase primary teacher wastage rates.
  - Inconsistency within the system.

- “Labelling” of children at an early age, which may have a long-term impact on their attitude towards education.

### **Is the current system of primary assessment fit for purpose?**

5. Our consultation with North East school leaders demonstrates that there are significant concerns about the current system of primary assessment. The purpose of assessment should be to give an indication of what stage a pupil is at in their learning and to facilitate effective planning and support for next steps. Assessment should also be linked to improving the quality of teaching and learning. A significant proportion of Heads that we consulted did not feel that the current system of primary assessment was fit for this purpose.
6. It should also be noted that the purpose of primary assessment is different from that of secondary assessment in one major respect; assessments at the end of key stages 4 and 5 lead directly to qualifications. These qualifications are then used by employers and higher education institutions to determine a young person’s suitability for future stages of work or study. In other words, the results of these assessments are likely to follow an individual around for the rest of his or her life, determining to a large extent what course their life takes. Whilst primary assessment should also prepare pupils for the next stage in their learning, there is a concern that the current system tests too narrow a skillset and focuses on attainment at the expense of achievement. Many respondents to our consultation felt that there were better ways to get a full picture of a pupils’ learning than the “snapshot” provided by standardised tests.
7. Primary assessment may also be expected to play a role in the transition to secondary school, but there is doubt among school leaders in the region that key stage 2 outcomes are useful for secondary colleagues in planning future learning, who tend to re-test in year 7. One Head observed, “the results of key stage 2 assessments have little impact on provision in key stage 3, other than as a starting point for accountability”.
8. Another issue that came up during our consultation was inconsistency across the system. The national results appear to show considerable inconsistencies in moderation across different local authorities, but external marking also seems to have been inconsistent. Furthermore, patterns in the test results and teacher assessments do not always correlate, which somewhat undermines the credibility of the system.
9. In addition to the purpose outlined above, it is clear these assessments have also been designed with school accountability and secondary assessment (e.g. benchmarking for Progress 8) in mind. Whilst there is nothing wrong with having multiple aims, there is concern within the teaching profession that the latest reforms have moved primary assessment towards accountability and compatibility with secondary measures at the expense of its main purpose.

### **The advantages and disadvantages of assessing pupils at primary school**

10. Whilst the North East school leaders that we consulted overwhelmingly felt that the current system of primary assessment is not fit for purpose, this should not be misinterpreted as opposition to assessment of primary pupils. Rather it is a reaction to the particular set of assessments that are currently in place. Indeed, framing primary assessment as having

advantages and disadvantages is perhaps not the most useful way of thinking about the issue. Instead, we should think about effective or ineffective primary assessment and thus the advantages and disadvantages of a specific system of assessment.

11. All respondents to our consultation agreed that assessment plays a vital role in primary education. Effective assessment allows teachers to understand what the next steps in a pupil's learning should be and therefore informs planning for next steps. It also allows teachers and parents to monitor a child's progress in a given area of learning. At the end of key stage 2, assessments play an important role in the transition to secondary school by informing secondary teachers what stage a pupil is at in their learning.
12. However, assessment systems also have the potential to be ineffective or, at worst, damaging and counterproductive. As one North Tyneside Head points out assessment can then become "a 'cold and detached' exercise which is not related to improving the quality of teaching and learning". Whilst data collection plays an important role in modern education, it is important that the purpose of such data is considered in designing an assessment system. There is concern, for instance, that the way data on primary assessment is currently being used by the Government has a stronger focus on school accountability – important as that is – than it does on ensuring the best educational outcomes for children and young people. Furthermore, one Head raised concern with us that when data is published, it "doesn't reflect the context of the school or the challenges it may be facing".
13. Assessment systems become ineffective as soon as they become divorced from their purpose. As such, the Government should be clear and explicit about the purpose of any system that they design and it should be evaluated in terms of the extent to which it meets this purpose.

### **The impact of recent reforms on teaching and learning**

14. The majority of schools that we consulted reported a negative impact on teaching and learning as a result of the recent reforms. One of the key areas of concern is that these reforms have caused a significant narrowing of the curriculum. As one Middlesbrough Head puts it, "we are having to narrow the curriculum to cover the huge content and to meet the very challenging targets". A class teacher from the region noted, "the time dedicated to English has increased dramatically and the timetable has become much more prescriptive".
15. Primary schools in the North East are keen to continue providing a broad and rich curriculum to their pupils and there is a clear concern that these reforms undermine their ability to do so. Indeed, some school leaders have suggested that recent changes to primary assessment have had the effect of actively disincentivising this; one Sunderland Head told us, "The link between pupil performance and appraisal means that only the most foolhardy (or brave) members of staff will be bold enough to provide a full curriculum at the risk of not achieving detailed assessment criteria".
16. Linked to this narrowing of the curriculum, schools reported to us that primary teachers in the relevant year groups are increasingly being forced to "teach to the test". Whilst there is no doubt that this has led to some useful learning in areas that were not previously covered, it places restrictions on any areas of learning that are not included in the tests and, perhaps most worryingly, risks turning children off classroom-based learning altogether. One Head Teacher in

Gateshead said that this approach to teaching and learning could “possibly hamper children’s attitudes and progress throughout their educational career”.

17. Another concerning consequence of recent reforms has been an increase in stress among both pupils and teachers. This was reported by numerous schools during our consultation and reflects a broader issue of mental health in schools. SCHOOLS NorthEast is committed to addressing this issue and has recently launched a schools-led mental health commission chaired by Professor Dame Sue Bailey. In preliminary consultations for the commission, we have heard from North East primary school leaders that they observed a considerable increase in anxiety and stress relating to assessment during the last academic year. This is a worrying development among primary-aged children.
18. It should be noted, however, that one County Durham Head reported no increase in stress because the school had an effective approach in place to deal with this. Where we can find examples of best practice, SCHOOLS NorthEast is committed to exploring these further and sharing our findings with schools in the region and beyond.
19. Along with increased stress for teachers, school leaders informed us that these reforms have increased teacher workload and this also has the potential to drive teachers out of the profession. According to the most recently published school workforce survey in November 2015, the wastage rate in primary schools is 10.0, compared with 11.2 in secondary schools. Until data from the next survey is published it is hard to say whether or not the most recent reforms have had any impact on teacher wastage, but this is something that the Government should be monitoring closely.
20. When all of these elements are brought together – increased stress, teacher wastage, narrowing curricula, “teaching to the test” – we get a picture of a primary sector that is beginning to replicate some of the problems that we have seen at secondary level. The Government should put serious consideration to how to reverse these issues and the most effective way of doing this is through thorough consultation with education professionals.

### **Logistics and delivery of SATs**

21. Primary teachers in the North East were very unhappy with the delivery of the new SATs during the last academic year. Heads in our region have described the implementation as “chaotic” and “confused”. Whilst an element of confusion may be expected in any transition to a new assessment system, this can generally be mitigated by taking the time to allow for wide consultation with all the key stakeholders – notably the teaching profession – and thus a smooth transition. There is a widespread feeling within North East schools, however, that the implementation of the new SATs was rushed and that there was insufficient engagement with education professionals and parents during this process.
22. According to one Durham Head this led to “teachers frantically preparing children to take redesigned tests with little guidance, information or clarity”. It is clear that communication from the Department for Education was relatively poor last year and this was exacerbated by a number of high profile mistakes which gave the impression that the Department was not in full control of the situation. This undermined schools’ confidence in the process surrounding the new assessments and so communication is going to have to greatly improve in the current academic year to win this confidence back.

23. There were also specific concerns about individual elements of the new assessments. Whilst Committee members will no doubt be aware of some of these issues, it is worth outlining those that our schools have identified again. Of particular concern for key stage 2 SATs were reading tests “where a reading age of 15 is required and the subject matter is obscure, with strong overtones of class distinction in favour of the privileged sector in our society”. The writing tests were seen by some Heads as “too subjective” and having the effect of “promoting a mechanistic approach to teaching writing to meet the standard rather than focus on laying the building blocks of a good writer”, whilst grammar tests were “at the level previously expected at GCSE”.
24. At key stage 1, there was concern that children were expected to work with equipment in maths during lessons, but were then assessed without this equipment. According to one Head in Middlesbrough, “the concentration on bringing in formal methods much earlier is going back to teaching maths by rote and losing the depth of subject knowledge children had previously”.

### **Training and support needed for teachers and leaders**

25. Whilst teachers and school leaders are very capable of designing and implementing effective assessment systems, additional training, support and guidance would be welcome. This would help to address some of the concerns that Head Teachers have expressed to us about external moderation and assessment. For instance, one Head noted that “Ofsted inspectors will struggle to understand individual schools’ methods to come to a judgement about progress across year groups”. As such, schools would appreciate guidance to ensure that the systems that they put into place are appropriate.

### **Next steps**

26. SCHOOLS NorthEast welcomes the announcement on primary assessment made by the Secretary of State on 19 October. When she spoke at our Summit on 13 October, concerns were raised about this very topic and we are happy to see that she is responsive to the feelings of school leaders, who see the impact of education policy first-hand every day. SCHOOLS NorthEast hopes that the Department for Education will continue to pursue this dialogue with teachers on assessment and accountability.
27. School leaders in the region particularly welcomed the announcement that there would be no new tests or national assessments before 2018. As one Head Teacher in Redcar and Cleveland put it, “we desperately need a period of stability in the near future”. This period will allow schools and the Government to properly assess the impact of these changes and to start a meaningful dialogue on what could be changed or improved. Our consultations have demonstrated that teachers and school leaders have strong opinions on primary assessment and if the Government harnesses their passion and knowledge, SCHOOLS NorthEast believes that we can collectively arrive at an effective system of assessment.
28. SCHOOLS NorthEast welcomes the opportunity to participate in this consultation and would be very happy to contribute further in any way that the Committee would find useful.