

2013/1

February 2013

Primary Policy Watch – consultation on the new National Curriculum

Did you miss it? Amid the furore over Michael Gove's U-turn on the proposed replacement for GCSEs, you'd be forgiven for not noticing that the DfE also announced this month the start of the formal consultation period on the new National Curriculum for maintained schools in England (feel free to stop reading and go and put the kettle on, academies). Draft Programmes of Study for English, maths and science were published last year (see [June 2012's Primary Policy Watch](#) for a summary); this month saw the release of updated versions of these plus, for the first time, proposed guidelines for the other National Curriculum subjects.

These proposals are, to quote the blurb introducing the consultation process, 'the culmination of extensive analysis of curricula used in the world's most successful education jurisdictions ... and consideration of nearly 6,000 submissions to our call for evidence'. The DfE has also 'engaged with high-performing teachers and headteachers from across the country to learn more about the most effective practice in England, and [has] worked with subject experts and key organisations across all National Curriculum subjects to inform our thinking'.

The direction of travel is unsurprising. The emphasis is on core knowledge, the 'nuts and bolts' of subjects that will ensure pupils have a strong basis on which to build future learning. The lengthy Programmes of Study for the 'vital' subjects of English, maths and science are intended as 'a detailed guide to teachers to support them in bringing about a step-change in performance'. Other (less vital?) subjects are treated in a more light-touch manner, although the level of detail in, for example, the history curriculum is still substantial.

All subjects in the current National Curriculum remain, although ICT has been renamed 'computing' to reflect the greater emphasis on practical programming skills, and languages are now to be compulsory at Key Stage 2.

English

The first draft of the English Programme of Study positioned phonics as *the* approach to teaching reading, increased the emphasis on grammar, spelling and punctuation, moved away from specifying which text types children should encounter in each year, and encouraged schools to get children involved in debates and recitation.

There are few significant differences in the revised draft, although there are some subtle changes of emphasis. There is, for example, a greater focus on comprehension, and more continuity between the year groups, recognising that the essential skills remain the same, but need to be applied to increasingly challenging texts. There's also more non-fiction (now required at Year 1), and generally more talk of 'texts' rather than 'books' or 'stories'.

Maths

The emphasis on an earlier understanding of key maths skills that could be seen in the first draft of the maths Programme of Study remains. Many skills and concepts will need to be taught one, two or even three years earlier than is currently the case. One or two concepts that were in the first draft (e.g. binary) have been quietly dropped, but the overall impression of a significantly more challenging curriculum remains. The emphasis on efficient written methods of calculation is still there, though the need to use columnar addition and subtraction has moved from Year 2 to Year 3.

The biggest change from the first draft is the much greater emphasis on problem solving. The first draft was roundly criticised for stating the importance of developing the ability to problem solve, but not following through on this in the detail. This has now been addressed, with an emphasis on problem solving in all areas.

Science

There have been some changes to the science Programme of Study since the first draft, mainly around the way in which 'working scientifically' is treated. Following strong criticism that the knowledge-based approach had gone too far in science, the balance between fact-based objectives ('identify and name...') and enquiry-style objectives ('observe and describe...') is more even. The shift in emphasis away from physics and towards biology that could be seen in the first draft remains, but the degree of specification (e.g. of which plants, trees and animals need to be named and identified) has reduced.

Those 'less vital' subjects...

So what of the first glimpse of the proposals for the rest of the curriculum? As promised, the guidelines for all other subjects are much less detailed than those for English, maths and science, simply outlining the aims of each subject and listing the content to be taught at each key stage. As in the 'core' subjects, there is a clear emphasis on facts and figures. The geography curriculum, for example, majors on identifying and naming places and geographical features and describing key aspects of physical and human geography, while any mention of climate change or sustainability has been removed. The history curriculum focuses strongly on British history and, from Key Stage 2, takes a strictly chronological approach, starting with early Britons and settlers and ending with the Glorious Revolution. The newly statutory Key Stage 2 languages curriculum specifies the teaching of French, German, Italian, Spanish, Mandarin, Latin or Ancient Greek, with modern language teaching to focus on practical communication, and Latin or Ancient Greek teaching to provide a linguistic foundation for learning modern languages and for reading comprehension. The new computing curriculum, as mentioned above, aims to create a new generation of computer scientists, getting children writing simple programs in Key Stage 1 and correcting errors in algorithms and programs in Key Stage 2.

What happens next?

The consultation period runs until 16 April. The DfE will publish their response in the summer, and will publish the final National Curriculum 'early in the autumn term' to give schools a year to prepare for first teaching from September 2014.

Between September 2013 and September 2014 there is a complex proposal to allow schools to 'disapply' parts of the current National Curriculum in order to better prepare pupils for the introduction of the new curriculum. The current Programmes of Study for all foundation subjects in Primary schools will be disappplied from September 2013, as will those for English, maths and science in Years 3 and 4 ('to give teachers greater freedom to prepare pupils for National Curriculum tests in these subjects when they reach Year 6'). Teachers in Years 1, 2, 5 and 6, however, will need to continue to following the current Programmes of Study for English, maths and science, in order to prepare children appropriately for SATs.

Finally, brace yourselves for another consultation, this time on assessment. There is a reminder in these consultation documents that 'the Government has already announced its intention to [reform] how we report progress. We believe that the focus of teaching should be on subject content as set out in the programmes of study, rather than on a series of abstract level descriptions. Parents deserve a clear assessment of what their children have learned rather than a 'level description' which does not convey clear information ... Approaches to the assessment of pupils' progress and recognising the achievements of all pupils at primary school will be explored more fully within the primary assessment and accountability consultation which will be issued shortly.' Primary Policy Watch waits with bated breath...

Julie McCulloch

Pearson Primary

For further information of interest to Primary schools, please visit pearsonprimary.co.uk and thepearsonthinktank.com, or follow [@juliecmcculloch](https://twitter.com/juliecmcculloch) and [@PrimarySchool](https://twitter.com/PrimarySchool) on Twitter.