



Nick Gibb MP
Minister of State for Schools

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0870 0012345 ministers@education.gsi.gov.uk

Mr Graham Stuart MP
Chair, Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

5 November 2010

**NEW EXECUTIVE AGENCY FOR ASSESSMENT (DfE)
AND REVIEW OF NATIONAL CURRICULUM TESTS**

The Secretary of State will announce today an external review into testing and accountability at the end of Key Stage 2, chaired by Lord Bew. He will also be announcing the creation of a new Executive Agency for Assessment within the Department for Education, to oversee development and delivery of statutory assessment and testing for children up to 14. I will place a copy of this letter in the House library.

Review of Key Stage 2 testing and accountability

The Government is determined to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed and knows that head teachers and teachers share that determination. We believe that this is best achieved by ensuring that schools and teachers are free to set their own direction, trusted to exercise their professional discretion and accountable for the progress of the children in their care.

However, we know that there are problems with the current system of testing and accountability. We are establishing the review to take account of the concerns that have been raised by committed professionals.

The OECD has identified external accountability as a key driver of improvement in education, particularly for the least advantaged. The Government, therefore, believes it is vital to retain a system that provides for the objective and robust measurement of pupil progress and which enables

schools to be held to account. It is not our intention that the accountability system should be punitive or unfair to schools working in difficult circumstances, but it must be able to identify and tackle cases of sustained under-performance. It is important that parents and the public have confidence that schools are held to account for the contribution they make to pupils' progress and for the public money they receive.

We are pleased to announce that Lord Bew has agreed to chair an external review into testing and accountability at the end of Key Stage 2. Lord Bew's review will consider how we can reform the assessment and accountability system to take account of the concerns of head teachers, teachers, parents and the public. He will be supported and advised by a small panel of head teachers and education experts. I have attached the terms of reference for the review.

Executive Agency

It is essential that we make sure that whatever testing arrangements are in place following Lord Bew's review are delivered in a timely and effective way, with high quality tests and high quality marking. We are clear that it is right that accountability for this should rest with Ministers. The Executive Agency within the Department for Education will be accountable to the Secretary of State for the secure delivery of its functions. It will also enable the Department to forge stronger links between assessment policy and delivery and so provide a better service to schools, pupils and parents. The independent examinations regulator, Ofqual, will have an important role, as it does now with QCDA, in keeping under review the Agency's functions relating to statutory assessments, and ensuring the integrity and impartiality of national curriculum tests.

The remit and purpose of the new Agency will be to develop and deliver statutory assessment and testing, including the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), and statutory teacher assessments at Key Stage 1, 2 and 3, as well as national curriculum tests at Key Stage 2. The outcomes of Lord Bew's external review of Key Stage 2 tests, alongside the Early Years review which is already underway, and the planned curriculum review, will all need to be taken into account in determining the Agency's future remit.

The Agency is expected to operate formally from April 2012 following the closure of QCDA which is expected by March 2012, subject to the Parliamentary process. But in principle we would expect it to be established before that date with all key functions to be conducted by the Agency transferred by early autumn 2011.

The Agency will be headed by a Chief Executive who will report to a Senior Civil Servant within the Department and within a governance structure accountable to the Secretary of State and thereby to Parliament. Staff transferring to the Agency will become civil servants.

In determining the structure of the Agency, including staffing requirements, we will want to ensure that it provides value for money. It is a priority for us that the Agency has the right expertise and resource it needs to ensure the successful delivery of its functions.

In order to minimise risks to delivery in a period of change we have decided that the Agency will primarily be based in Coventry, where most of the staff working on national curriculum tests are located. We expect to publish a more detailed business case for the Agency early in the New Year.

I will continue to keep you informed of further developments.

With best wishes.

Your sincerely
Nick

Nick Gibb MP

Key Stage 2 testing and accountability review - Terms of Reference

Background

Raising standards and narrowing gaps are the central goals of the Government's education policy. The Government is determined to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed and knows that teachers and heads share that determination.

The Government believes that its goals are best achieved through ensuring that schools and teachers are free to set their own direction, trusted to exercise their professional discretion and accountable for the progress of the children in their care. Mindful that the OECD concludes that external accountability is a key driver of improvement in education and particularly important for the least advantaged, the Government continues to view a system of objectively measuring pupil progress and holding schools to account as vital.

However, there is evidence that, under the current system, too many schools feel they must drill children for tests and spending too much time on test preparation in Year 6 at the expense of productive teaching and learning. There are also concerns about a focus on children at the borderline of levels. This is clearly undesirable. The profession itself has raised concerns about the way assessment currently contributes to accountability.

Remit

In the light of this, the Secretary of State has commissioned this review to consider the testing and accountability system for primary schools in England. It will cover the following key issues:

- How best to ensure that the system of assessment in primary schools can improve standards of attainment and progress of pupils, and help narrow gaps.
- How best to ensure that schools are properly and fairly accountable to pupils, parents and the taxpayer for the achievement and progress of every child, on the basis of objective and accurate assessments; and that this reflects the true performance of the school.
- How to avoid, as far as possible, the risk of perverse incentives, over-rehearsal and reduced focus on productive learning.
- How to ensure that parents have good quality information on the progress of their children and the success of schools.
- How to ensure that performance information is used and interpreted appropriately within the accountability system by other agencies, increasing transparency and preserving accountability to parents,

pupils and the taxpayer, while avoiding the risk of crude and narrow judgements being made.

- How to ensure that tests are rigorous, and as valid and reliable as possible, within an overall system of assessment (including teacher assessment) which provides the best possible picture of every child's progress.
- How best to ensure that the assessment system allows us to make comparisons with education systems internationally.
- How to make administration of the system as simple and cost-effective as possible, with minimal bureaucracy.

The review will also consider the emerging conclusions of the review of the National Curriculum which is due to be launched later this year. The review may be invited to consider developing thinking from the National Curriculum review and suggest how testing and accountability could be taken forward in the longer term.

The review will be open, transparent and outward facing. A 12-week call for evidence will be issued inviting all interested parties – including primary, middle and special schools - to contribute to the review and to improving the testing and accountability system. After the 12-week period has concluded, the review panel will publish a progress report summarising the evidence gathered.

The review panel will publish a final report outlining the evidence and issues it has considered and making their recommendations. This report will be submitted to the Secretary of State by June 2011.