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Assessment without levels: qualitative research

Research report

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Executive summary

The removal of national curriculum levels in 2014 was designed to complement the introduction of a revised, more challenging national curriculum. The Commission on Assessment without Levels (CAWL) was set up to advise schools on the principles of effective assessment and to support and guide schools in developing their assessment policies and practice.

In their report (CAWL, 2015) the commission argued that the removal of levels would provide an impetus for pedagogical change, increasing pupil motivation and engagement and making better use of formative assessment in the classroom. By removing levels, the intention was to reduce the time spent by teachers in recording and tracking progress towards numerical targets and release time for more in-depth teaching and formative assessment approaches that would support progress across the attainment spectrum.

This qualitative research set out to gather evidence on the types and range of non-statutory assessment approaches in use in primary and secondary schools following the removal of levels. It focused exclusively on non-statutory assessment and did not include statutory assessment.

Key findings

Schools' changes to assessment and their impact on teachers and pupils

- Teachers and senior leaders said that they were focusing more on formative assessment since the introduction of Assessment without Levels (AWL). This was reported to be enabling teachers to differentiate activities, refine their planning and provide support more effectively. Some interviewees (especially those using a 'mastery' approach) reported that pupils now had a deeper understanding of topics, rather than focusing on progressing as quickly as possible through a series of levels.
- Interviewees from all schools were able to identify at least one area of their approach that they felt was working well, most commonly that their schools' non-statutory assessment approaches were more curriculum-led and effective than before AWL.
- Interviewees reported both positive and negative impacts of AWL on teachers' confidence in making summative judgements of pupils' attainment. Some were confident and felt that their schools' approaches were working well, especially those who had taken part in training and moderation. Others said that the lack of

national standards for non-statutory assessment had undermined teachers' confidence.

- Schools had commonly spent a great deal of time identifying and implementing their new approach. Most interviewees reported that teachers were now spending a similar amount of time on assessment as before AWL. A few reported an increase in workload due to the requirements of their school's new approach.
- Only a minority of interviewees felt that their school's assessment approach worked well for pupils with special educational needs (SEN). Others said that their school's approach did not adequately recognise the small steps of progress made by pupils with SEN. This concern was typically, but not exclusively, mentioned by interviewees from primary schools.

Communication with pupils and parents

- Schools used a variety of methods to communicate assessment information to pupils. Some interviewees reported a positive impact on pupils' understanding of what they needed to do in order to make progress. This was particularly the case in schools which encouraged pupils to set their own learning objectives.
- Generally, interviewees felt that the shift to providing pupils with more detailed feedback was helping to reduce the 'labelling' effect of levels. However, some teachers felt their school's approach was too poorly differentiated to motivate pupils.
- Interviewees reported opposing impacts of their assessment approach on communication with parents. Some found that parents welcomed the more descriptive information, whereas others said that parents had understood the previous system of levels and did not currently understand their new approach.

Schools' use of information and support for AWL

- Interviewees had commonly drawn on published information and taken part in training when AWL was first introduced.
- Schools were usually involved in collaboration with other schools, initially to discuss the merits of different assessment approaches and subsequently to provide ongoing information and moderation (especially among primary schools).
- Generally, interviewees said the best way to share good practice on non-statutory assessment was through collaboration with other schools and/or online resources. They did not feel the need for any further support on AWL, apart from annotated examples of students' work representing different categories of achievement in relation to national standards for non-statutory assessments (requested by a substantial minority of interviewees).

Current non-statutory assessment practice

- There are 4 main components to schools' non-statutory assessment approaches – formative assessment, summative assessment, moderation and tracking and reporting systems. Primary schools tended to use external tests and moderation more than secondary schools.
- Non-statutory assessment tended to focus on the core subjects of maths, English and science. Assessment of non-core subjects was, comparatively speaking, less frequent and rigorous in primary schools, whereas secondary schools tended to use a similar approach across all subjects. Some schools also assessed pupils' wider skills, attitudes and behaviour.
- Although there was a great deal of overlap, no 2 schools were using exactly the same descriptive categories to assess pupils' performance. Some were using the same number of categories, but with different names.
- Interviewees said that the diversity of schools' approaches made it difficult for teachers to understand the non-statutory assessment information they received when pupils transferred to their school, or when moderating work with teachers in other schools.

Conclusion

The removal of levels has meant that schools participating in this research have re-focused on formative assessment and interviewees attest to the positive impact of this. On the whole, interviewees indicated that the quality of feedback and communication with pupils had improved. However, the removal of national curriculum levels and the encouragement for schools to develop their own approaches have led to a perceived lack of common understanding between schools. The influence of statutory national assessment is still clearly apparent in schools' non-statutory assessment and continues to be the main driver for formative and summative assessment.

This research suggested that schools would welcome a form of national standardisation for non-statutory assessment guided by annotated exemplars of pupils' work rather than an item bank of questions (as recommended by the 2015 CAWL report), and there would be potential interest in an online forum together with access to case studies of schools' assessment approaches. The research also endorsed the need to address the issue of how best to recognise pupils' progress, especially for pupils with SEN.

Research methods

This report is based on 118 semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews (42 with senior leaders and 76 with teachers) in 42 primary and secondary schools in England. Interviews took place in October and November 2017. There were remarkably few differences of view in relation to the role or phase of the interviewees. However, although the research team approached schools with a wide range of assessment practices, senior leaders who were not confident in their school's approach to assessment tended to decline the invitation to take part. For this reason, schools with less well-developed approaches are likely to be under-represented in this research.

1. Policy context and research design

When national curriculum levels were originally introduced in the late 1980s, they were intended for use in statutory assessment only and to report the outcomes of the key stage tests and statutory teacher assessment judgements. However, over time levels and sub-levels came to be used by schools for all forms of assessment, including in-school formative assessment.

One of the main reasons for the removal of national curriculum levels in 2014 was the introduction of a revised, more challenging national curriculum. The national curriculum review expert panel (DfE, 2011) considered that levels inhibited teachers and pupils and therefore recommended their removal. It was anticipated that removing levels would encourage teachers to relate the assessment of pupils' attainment and progress to the curriculum (pupils' knowledge and understanding), rather than focusing on numerical outcomes or targets. Further, the expert panel argued that the removal of national curriculum levels would eliminate other negative impacts on teaching that the use of levels for formative assessment had created. In summary, changing the culture of levels was considered to be fundamental to raising standards of attainment in England's schools.

The removal of levels required schools to develop bespoke assessment approaches to support teaching and to facilitate dialogue between teachers, pupils and parents and between schools and key stakeholders, such as governors, Ofsted inspectors and local authorities. The Department for Education (DfE) therefore set up the CAWL to advise schools on the principles of effective assessment and to support and guide schools in developing their assessment policies and practice. The commission (CAWL, 2015) agreed with the findings of the national curriculum review expert panel and concluded that the use of levels for formative assessment had adversely affected teaching. For example, rather than using assessments to identify gaps in understanding, teachers were assessing pupils by 'levelling' pieces of work. Because levels used a 'best-fit'¹ model, it was often unclear which aspects of the curriculum pupils had fully consolidated. Levels were also used in conversations between teachers and pupils and parents, resulting not only in potentially meaningless dialogue, but also creating a culture of labelling pupils, supporting a mind-set of fixed ability. Further, the DfE's Workload Challenge Consultation (DfE, 2015) reported that school data management systems were often complex and unwieldy, and teachers spent too much time collecting and recording teacher

¹ In a best-fit model, teachers use a 'compensatory' approach in judging whether a piece of work has met a set of criteria for the award of a particular level, grade or standard, for example, not all the criteria have to be met. Weaknesses in one area can be made up with strengths in another. This can be contrasted to a secure-fit model or 'mastery' approach, in which a pupil has to meet each and every criterion in order to meet the standard.

assessment data. This issue was considered in the CAWL report, which pointed out that there was little need for teachers to record formative assessment or to provide extensive collections of marked pupils' work for inspection purposes.

According to the commission (CAWL, 2015), the removal of levels would provide an impetus for pedagogical change, increasing pupil motivation and engagement; and making better use of formative assessment in the classroom. It would reduce the time spent by teachers recording and tracking progress towards numerical targets and release time for more in-depth teaching and formative assessment approaches that would support progress across the attainment spectrum.

In the commission's report, evidence of successful transition to AWL was characterised as:

- fostering in pupils a sense of responsibility for their own progress
- enabling more meaningful dialogue about attainment and progress between pupils and teachers and between schools and parents/carers
- improving teacher confidence in using assessment to inform teaching
- providing strong integrated systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
- encouraging greater professional expertise in assessment
- resulting in improved outcomes for pupils in the longer term.

However, the commission (CAWL, 2015, p.43) recognised that many schools were reluctant to replace their level-based assessment systems and were 'just beginning the journey towards assessment without levels'. They acknowledged the considerable challenges faced by schools in moving away from levels and raised a concern that new systems being adopted by some schools were recreating levels by another name.

Since 2015, primary and secondary schools have experienced further changes to the statutory assessment and accountability arrangements, including the introduction of new floor standards for accountability. The implication for this research is that interviewees were responding to more widespread changes to curriculum and assessment in addition to the move away from levels.

In primary schools, the assessment arrangements for statutory end-of-key stage tests changed in 2015 to 2016, with new tests aligned to the 2014 curriculum and the results reported in the form of scaled scores (with 100 representing the expected standard). Interim frameworks for statutory teacher assessment at the end of key stages 1 and 2 were introduced in the same year. In secondary schools, alongside the new key stage 3 (KS3) curriculum, there were changes to GCSEs – more rigorous content and a new grading structure (A*-G being replaced by 9 to 1 over a three-year period from 2017 to 2020). Most significantly, Progress 8 was introduced in 2016 as the main indicator of

school performance, replacing the previous 5 A*-C GCSEs attainment indicator. Alongside these external changes, schools have been gradually developing their internal assessment systems and practices.

In May 2017 the House of Commons Education Committee (GB, Parliament, HoC, 2017) reported on its inquiry into assessment in primary schools. The committee expressed concern about the number and speed of changes to primary assessment and accountability arrangements, reporting that schools did not have sufficient time to implement effective in-school assessment systems.

In 2017 DfE launched 2 consultations on the proposals for the future of primary assessment – Primary assessment in England (DfE, 2017a) and Primary school pupil assessment: Rochford Review recommendations (DfE, 2017b). The government response to the first of these, published just prior to the fieldwork for this project, signalled several changes to the primary assessment arrangements, including changes to the assessment of progress (by means of a new baseline measure), the removal of key stage 1 (KS1) statutory assessments and changes to statutory teacher assessment requirements. In response to the second consultation, it was confirmed that the requirement to assess pupils engaged in subject-specific study using P scales will be removed and that the interim pre-key stage standards will be made permanent and extended to include all pupils working below the standard of the national curriculum but engaged in subject-specific study. Such changes may further affect primary schools' non-statutory assessment systems and practices.

1.1 Research aims, design and methods

The over-arching aim of the research was to gather evidence on the types and range of non-statutory assessment approaches in use in schools following the removal of levels.

Specific objectives were to investigate:

- a. current non-statutory assessment practice
- b. impacts that have resulted from the removal of levels
- c. challenges/barriers to the implementation of new systems and processes
- d. sources of support accessed by schools, collaboration between schools and future support needs.

The longer-term objective was to enable DfE to share examples of effective practice in schools and to help develop further guidance and support for schools, where required.

DfE commissioned a qualitative study, designed to gather rich, in-depth data from schools with a range of different contexts and practices. The main method of data collection was through telephone interviews with senior leaders and teachers.

NFER identified the sample of primary and secondary schools from 2 sources – NFER’s teacher voice panel and an ‘innovative practice’ sample. Teacher voice includes school leaders² from a nationally representative sample of schools who have expressed a willingness to engage in research. The purpose of the ‘innovative’ sample was to ensure that the research included sufficient examples of assessment practice that schools felt were innovative and/or effective. The team identified these schools through web searches of conferences and social media, looking for schools which felt sufficiently confident to share their assessment practice with others. Other school details were also considered, including school phase, type and Ofsted rating.

The research team contacted school leaders, seeking an interview with them (or an appropriate senior colleague) and 2 classroom teachers. Interviews were requested with teachers of key stages 1 and 2 in primary schools and of different subjects in secondary schools (one from a core subject³ and one from a non-core subject), focusing on KS3.

In order to obtain a good spread of schools with different assessment practices, we asked senior leaders contacted via the teacher voice panel to provide some brief information about their assessment approach in advance of the interview. Further information about the sample characteristics and range of assessment approaches is provided in the appendix.

The final achieved sample comprised 118 interviewees from 42 schools (27 primary and 15 secondary, 32 from the teacher voice sample and 10 from the ‘innovative practice’ sample – please see the appendix for further details). Interviews took place over a 6-week period from October to early November 2017. The research team devised the interview schedules in collaboration with DfE. There were slightly different versions for senior leaders and classroom teachers, to reflect their different roles in relation to non-statutory assessment. The interview schedules were piloted with senior leaders and teachers and revised to take account of their comments.

Interviews typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were audio-recorded (with the interviewees’ permission) to ensure that quotes were accurately reported. Interviewers wrote up their notes and also compiled a school summary, representing the information

² For the purpose of this research we refer to headteachers, deputy heads and assistant heads as ‘senior leaders’.

³ English, maths or science.

from all 3 interviewees in each school. The research team analysed the school summaries and interview notes using a qualitative data software package (MAXQDA).

The research team looked for differences in views expressed by senior leaders and teachers and also in relation to whether they worked in primary or secondary schools. In general, interviewees in different roles and phases expressed similar views, but we have reported differences where these exist. Illustrative examples of practice have been included in the report, but these are not necessarily intended to represent best practice.

Although the research team was keen to include schools with a wide range of assessment approaches, senior leaders who were not confident in their school's approach to assessment tended to decline the invitation to take part. For this reason, schools with less well-developed approaches are likely to be under-represented in this research.

2. Overview of non-statutory assessment practice

Key findings

- There are 4 main components to schools' non-statutory assessment approaches – formative assessment (typically day-to-day), summative assessment (typically 2 to 3 times a year), moderation (typically at least annually, and tracking and reporting systems (typically termly reporting).
- Non-statutory assessment tended to focus on the core subjects of maths, English and science. Assessment of non-core subjects was, comparatively speaking, less frequent and rigorous in primary schools, whereas secondary schools tended to use a similar approach across all subjects. Some schools also assessed pupils' wider skills, attitudes and behaviour.
- All participating schools used a tracking system, most of which were purchased from an external provider.
- Primary schools were commonly using a combination of teacher assessment and testing using externally-developed tests, along with moderation of teacher assessments with other schools.
- Secondary schools were more varied in their approaches, typically using teacher assessment and testing developed by staff. Few secondary interviewees said they used external moderation.
- Although there was a great deal of overlap, no 2 schools were using exactly the same categories to assess pupils' performance. Some were using the same number of categories, but with different names.
- Interviewees said that the diversity of schools' approaches made it difficult for teachers to understand the non-statutory assessment information they received when pupils transferred to their school.

Introduction

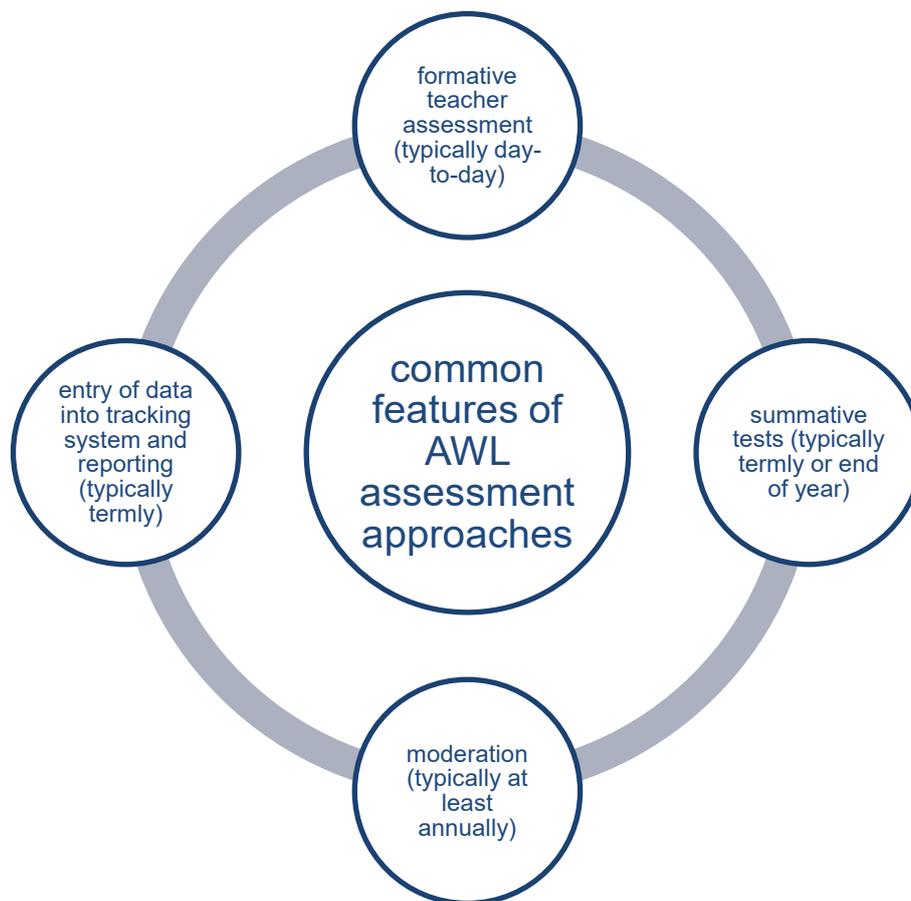
This chapter provides an overview of schools' current approaches to formative and summative non-statutory assessment.

2.1 The main components of assessment

'No one bases it [the judgement] on one thing or another, it has to be a combination of all the evidence.' (Primary senior leader)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the main components common to schools' assessment approaches are formative assessment, summative assessment, moderation and tracking.

Figure 1 The main components of schools' non-statutory assessment approaches



Interviewees described a range of assessment approaches designed to draw on the main common components of formative and summative assessment, tracking pupils' progress and, in most cases, some form of moderation. Around half of these approaches were developed by the schools themselves (this was particularly the case for schools in the innovative practice sample). In other cases, schools had adopted an approach suggested by other schools, for example those in their multi-academy trust (MAT) or local authority (LA). Even where an assessment approach had been developed by their own school, senior leaders recognised that their chosen approaches might have features in common with assessment systems adopted by other schools.

It was common for interviewees to say that their schools' approaches to non-statutory assessment focused on the core subjects.⁴ Particularly in the case of primary schools, interviewees described the assessment of the non-core subjects as less frequent or

⁴ Comprising maths, English and in some schools, science.

rigorous. In such cases, primary schools had typically prioritised the development of assessment approaches of core subjects because these subjects contribute to their end-of-key stage accountability measures. Some of these schools mentioned an intention to roll out their assessment approach to non-core subjects, however at the time of this research they were still refining their approach to assessing English and maths. Some interviewees said that the focus on assessment of core subjects had led to a narrowing of the curriculum because other subjects were receiving less attention and/or reduced class time. This was less of an issue in secondary schools, which tended to use similar formative and summative approaches for all subjects, although some schools prioritised recording assessment data for EBacc subjects.

Primary and secondary schools had adopted slightly different models of assessment. The most common approach used by almost all primary schools involved in this research was a combination of teacher assessment and testing using externally-developed products, along with moderation of teacher assessments with other schools. In contrast, secondary schools were more varied in their approach to non-statutory assessment, typically using combinations of teacher assessment and testing (which was more likely to be developed in-house). Very few secondary interviewees reported using externally-developed tests. Moderation was also much less commonly reported in secondary schools. Approaches to tracking and reporting pupil performance data were similar in primary and secondary schools.

Example 1 shows how staff in one secondary school revised their approach following the change to AWL.

Example 1: one school's response to AWL

A secondary academy developed its own bespoke assessment system which has subsequently been adopted by other schools in the MAT. The approach is underpinned by the school's belief that assessment should be driven by curriculum design. Curriculum leads began by devising key performance indicators (KPIs) based on their curriculum and what they expected students to achieve by the end of year 11 (in their GCSEs). They then worked backwards to identify what needed to be achieved at different points along the way. The curriculum and KPIs focus on 3 key skill areas – knowledge, understanding and literacy. Teachers devised their own summative tests to ensure that they related to the school's curriculum. A teacher explained how this prioritised high-quality teaching: *'It's made us write the Scheme of Work first and think about the learning and the assessment comes afterwards. Whereas before [we] would have written all the assessments and then written the Scheme of Work around the assessment.'*

Staff set each student targets for KS3 and KS4 based on their KS2 grades. Throughout KS3, students take the school-developed tests 6 times in EBacc subjects⁵, with their performance considered in relation to their targets. The scores on each assessment are accumulated to provide a total point score out of 600 at the end of year 8. This score relates to a GCSE sub-grade, with grade 5 being the highest that can be achieved at KS3. A teacher explained that the increased focus on target grades means – *'it is much easier to track individual pupil's progress under the new system'*. In vocational subjects, students must achieve, attain and master certain skills to achieve a certain grade.

The school has also increased its focus on formative feedback. Teachers provide written feedback to students on their test results. Students are given the opportunity to reflect on their feedback and consider it in relation to their KPIs. The school has a policy to provide students with a piece of marked work at least every 3 weeks for each subject. Teachers provide feedback in the form of qualitative comments rather than a grade. A teacher explained that following AWL *'the feedback is very much about their individual targets.'*

A senior leader said that the staff were pleased to remove levels, because they considered them to be 'meaningless'. Now the focus has moved towards students learning the curriculum content and meeting individual targets, with assessment being used to monitor and support this.

We now provide more detail on each of the assessment components in turn, starting with common approaches to formative assessment.

2.1.1 Formative assessment

As set out in the CAWL report (2015, p.5) in-school formative assessment is used by teachers to evaluate pupils' knowledge and understanding on a day-to-day basis and to tailor teaching accordingly. Formative assessment approaches were largely developed in-house by schools and used across key stages and subjects, although in some cases there had been a staggered roll-out (for example with core subjects implementing the changes first) as explained by one primary school senior leader:

'As there has been so much change in assessment we have had to prioritise reading, writing, maths, science and SPAG [spelling, punctuation and grammar].... We have got a weakness [in assessing other subjects]. Whereas in the past, with the levels, we knew exactly where we were, we could tick things off. With this one,

⁵ The EBacc is a school performance measure. It shows how many pupils study the core academic subjects at key stage 4, comprising results in English, maths, science, a language and geography or history.

not so much work has been done on what 'age appropriate' is for history, for example. In our area, it's all very much English [and] maths.'

Formative assessment methods included quizzes, 'low-stakes' skills/knowledge tests, 'thumbs up or thumbs down', questioning in class, pupil self-assessment, homework, marking and 'open-book'⁶ tasks. Typically primary and secondary interviewees reported using a combination of these methods, with classroom teachers able to decide which methods would work best in their class.

Many interviewees mentioned that they had drawn on resources to support formative teacher assessment from national or local partnerships with schools, or online networks (also see chapter 5 for further information on schools' use of support and guidance).

Teachers typically used formative assessment to inform their planning of the next few lessons. For example, some teachers described using a 'cold task' before teaching a new concept or module, to see what pupils already knew and could do. They used the results to adjust their teaching (to cover certain aspects in greater depth), differentiate content for individuals and/or to arrange additional support for pupils who had not grasped a particular concept or skill.

2.1.2 Summative assessment

In-school summative assessment enables schools to evaluate how much a pupil has learned at the end of a teaching period (CAWL, 2015, p.5). Interviewees reported that summative assessment commonly took place 2 or 3 times a year, often in the form of a baseline, follow-up and end-of-year assessment. In contrast to formative assessment, which was used on a frequent basis to inform day-to-day planning and teaching, results from the summative tests supported longer-term lesson and course planning.

Most schools were using externally produced tests for summative assessment, particularly in the case of primary schools. Many of the interviewees from primary schools said their schools used external summative assessment products for maths, reading and spelling. However, some said they had been unable to find a suitable externally produced assessment for writing, so schools had decided to develop their own assessment instead.

Many primary school interviewees chose external summative tests in order to make comparisons of their pupils' performance to the national picture. Senior leaders said they wanted to be able to predict the results pupils would achieve in the statutory tests at the end of key stage 2 (KS2). When deciding which externally produced tests to use, one

⁶ Informal assessment tasks in which pupils have access to reference books.

primary senior leader's response was typical – *'I'm looking for something that's robust and objective in terms of how I'm going to get information out of it.'*

It was more common for secondary interviewees to report that their schools had developed their own summative assessments. Secondary school interviewees tended to say that they used a similar approach for all subjects and year groups, although often implementation had been rolled out subject-by-subject, starting with maths, English and science. A few secondary interviewees mentioned the lack of published assessment resources available for KS3 as a reason for developing their own tests.

2.1.3 Moderation

Senior leaders and teachers from both primary and secondary schools felt that moderation was an important tool for quality assurance of their teacher assessments (see chapter 5 for more information about working with other schools). In particular, primary interviewees said this was helpful when assessing writing tasks because of the inherent difficulty of assessing pupils' written work. One primary teacher explained how their school was using moderation, which was typical of interviewees' responses:

'[To make sure our expectations of pupils are comparable] we've worked with a few other schools for moderation and we all come in and share the children's books and we [review] each other's books, to double check that we are equal in the way we are assessing.'

Moderation between schools was also valued as a way of giving teachers confidence in their judgements because they could see how their marking related to that of teachers in other schools.

Most commonly, interviewees reported participating in moderation with other schools for a single subject at a time, often within existing school clusters or in the case of academies, with other schools in their MAT. Interviewees typically described moderation events as meetings of small groups of staff with similar roles in different schools, during which teachers would look at each other's judgements on 'real' pieces of pupils' work, see if they agreed and resolve any differences. Some interviewees from secondary schools or large primary schools said that because of their size, the school engaged in internal moderation. This tended to be of a single subject and was often conducted by a senior leader to provide an indication of the consistency of marking across the school.

2.1.4 Tracking and reporting

All schools reported using some form of tracking system to understand how pupils were attaining and progressing in relation to curriculum objectives. These systems were generally used across the school. They were accompanied by targets based on pupils'

prior attainment. Some interviewees described using modelling approaches (tracking back from statutory assessment) to inform whether a pupil was making the expected progress, or was above or below their target.

Interviewees said that teachers were typically expected to enter summative and in some cases, formative, assessment data into tracking systems every term or half term. However, some secondary schools had a requirement for data to be recorded after every 6 or 8 lessons, which meant that for subjects such as English and maths the recording requirement could be as frequent as every 2 to 3 weeks. In most cases, the decision about recording teachers' own day-to-day formative assessment data (in addition to their school's requirement for formal recording of assessment data), was left to each teacher.

Senior leaders particularly valued the ability to extract data from tracking systems and delve into the results of individuals or particular groups (for example, low or high attaining, or those with SEN). One senior leader in a secondary school commented – *'I would say the best thing about what we do is our ability to track individual students. It's quite fine-tuned in that respect.'* This interviewee went on to explain that the school's tracking system flags up problems immediately and *'allows us to see if a student isn't performing as well as they should.'* This enabled staff to identify if the student was having a difficulty in one subject or across multiple subjects and staff could decide how best to respond (for example, through a combination of subject teachers and form tutors).

Example 2 shows how one school used its tracking system to support different pupils.

Example 2: ability to identify and track progress of individuals and key groups

Staff in this secondary school said that their approach to identifying and tracking the progress of pupils is working particularly well. A senior leader explained that the new system provides teachers with useful information on the progress of students at all levels of attainment.

There are 2 whole-school reporting phases per academic year for each year group. In the first phase, teachers give students a current grade and one of 3 different effort scores in each subject. In the second reporting phase, teachers estimate an end of year grade, and 3 effort scores, plus targets for improvement. At each reporting phase, the head of each department looks at the data for every year group and identifies key pupil groups, such as pupil premium and English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, examines their progress and discusses the data with colleagues to decide what action is needed.

Any pupil who is working above their targets is identified so that they can be given higher-level targets to support their continuing development. Pupils working below their targets are identified for specific intervention support in order to help them progress. According to a PE teacher, the monitoring of pupil progress has significantly improved

with the new system – *'In terms of knowing what stage pupils are at and what progress they've made, I think it works much better now.'*

A common approach in schools that took part in the research was to hold regular (termly or half-termly) progress meetings with teachers to identify gaps in pupils' knowledge. This allowed them to identify pupils who had not made the expected progress against the objectives for their age and make arrangements for interventions to be put in place for such pupils. In some schools, progress meetings were also held with the pupils themselves. A few schools had adopted an almost entirely online system comprising electronic mark books which were completed and marked online, allowing data to be drawn from the system on an almost continuous basis. The functionality of these programs allowed senior leaders and in some cases, parents, to view the 'live' data. The decision to move to a more online approach seemed to be linked to the school's strategy and a desire to aid the collection and analysis of pupil performance data, rather than any specific school characteristics or features of their overall approach to assessment.

Most schools were using a tracking system developed by an external provider. Less commonly, senior leaders said that their school had developed their own tracking system (typically simple systems using spreadsheets) because they wanted a completely bespoke approach. They said they had decided to develop their own systems because the external products on offer were too time-consuming to complete, or did not offer the nuance that they were seeking.

Many senior leaders said the reason they had chosen their externally produced tracking system was because it gave them the flexibility that they required. One primary senior leader described the benefits of amending an external product to meet the school's needs:

'I think working through it has probably made it stronger, because we've had to think about what we really want – what information do we need to give to parents, what information do we need to give to governors – and then we created a system that allowed us to do all those things.'

In some cases, schools were using the same product as before AWL because the provider had adapted their products to reflect the removal of levels, for example by re-programming the system to accommodate changes in language and assessment categories. In a few schools, the senior leader said they had paid for a bespoke tracking system because they had not been able to find an existing product which would split the data by all of the different pupil characteristics that they wanted to consider.

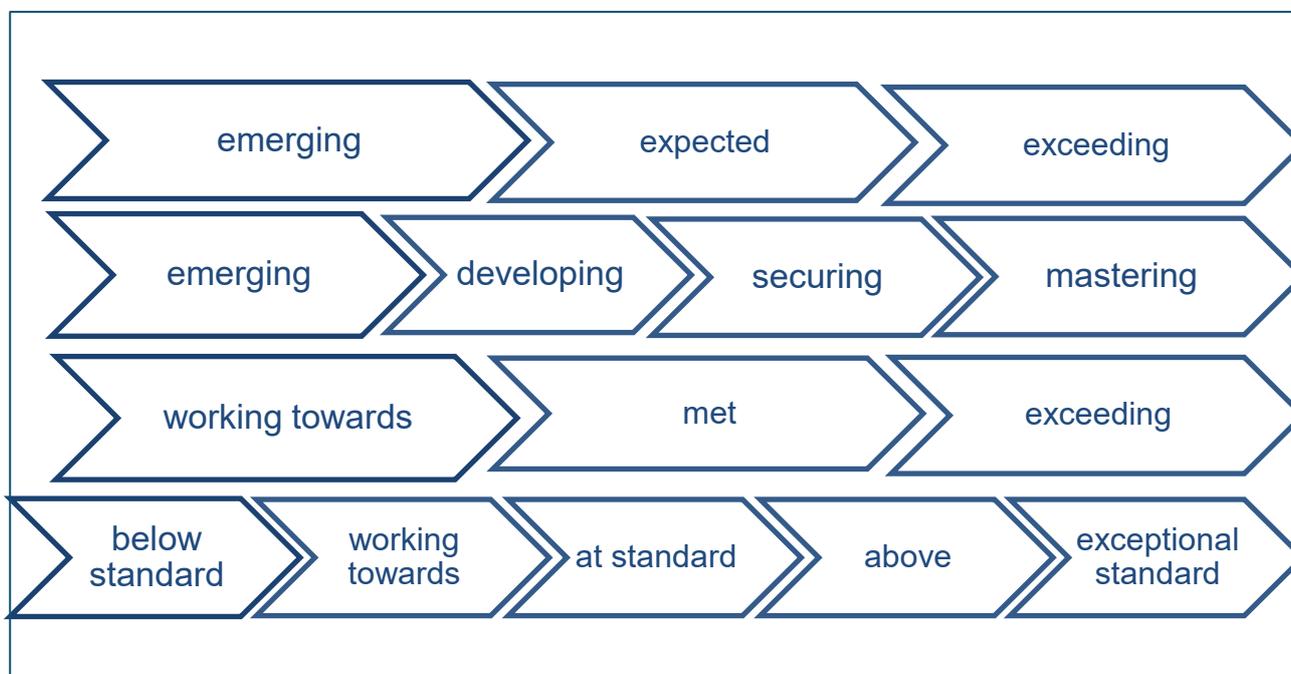
2.2. Describing pupils' attainment and progress

The change mentioned most commonly by interviewees was the new language they had developed to describe assessment outcomes. Although some were very similar, no 2 schools in our sample used exactly the same combination of categories and descriptors, illustrating the challenge faced by many schools when collaborating with others on assessment. Even though several schools in the sample were using the same externally produced systems, they had customised them by changing the number or names of the categories. However, several schools were using the same system as others outside of the group we spoke to, for example schools that were part of a MAT.

Interviewees described a range of systems, typically using 3 or 4 descriptive categories relating to a pupil's performance to an expected standard. Less commonly, schools had adopted a system based on colours (for example red/amber/green, or bronze/silver/gold). In a few cases, schools were using alphabetical or numerical scales (mainly in secondary schools, in line with GCSE grading structures). Some schools used a dual system, in which teachers used numerical scales for monitoring within the school which were then converted into descriptors or colour categories to be communicated with pupils and parents.

Figure 2 shows 4 examples of descriptive assessment categories used by schools participating in the research.

Figure 2 examples of schools' descriptive assessment categories



The figure illustrates some of the differences between schools. For example, not all pupils whose performance is described as 'emerging' in the first example would be described similarly in the second example (because of the different number of categories). A similar variation can be seen between the 2 schools using 'working towards'. In addition to the categories shown above, a few schools had introduced sub-categories, for example, using plus and minus signs. In some schools this provided an indication of direction travelled and in others it was used to provide more detailed indicators of pupils' attainment.

Due to the wide variation in language used by schools, both primary and secondary interviewees said they found it difficult to compare results with other schools or understand the assessment information they received when pupils transferred to their school. This was an ongoing challenge, particularly for schools with a high rate of pupil mobility. In some cases, interviewees said their schools had introduced their own baseline assessments, rather than relying on the information provided by other schools. Interviewees in secondary schools said that because the primary schools used different assessment approaches and terminology, it was difficult to understand the attainment data they provided and some questioned the reliability of the assessment data (especially for subjects that had no statutory assessment). Variations in assessment language also had implications for the success of school-to-school moderation exercises, as discussed in chapter 5.

In addition to assessing subject-related skills, some interviewees said that their approach included an assessment of other dimensions of learning, such as skills for learning, effort, attitudes and behaviour. Schools had chosen to focus on these skills to increase pupils' ownership of their education. Feedback on these other aspects of learning was usually subject to the same categories and feedback process as academic attainment.

3. Schools' changes to assessment and their impact on teachers and pupils

Key findings

- Schools had commonly spent a great deal of time identifying and implementing their new approach. Their key considerations were to devise a rigorous and robust approach consistent with statutory assessment, because they were focused on their performance in relation to national accountability measures. They also wanted to provide more formative feedback to pupils and to minimise the impact on teacher workload.
- Interviewees from all schools were able to identify at least one area of their approach that they felt was working well, most commonly that their schools' non-statutory approaches were more curriculum-led and effective than before AWL.
- Most interviewees reported that teachers were now spending a similar amount of time on assessment as before. A few reported a continuing increase in workload due to the requirements of their school's new approach.
- Interviewees said that they were focusing more on formative assessment since AWL. This was reported to be enabling teachers to differentiate activities, refine their planning and provide support more effectively. Some interviewees (especially those using a 'mastery' approach) reported that pupils now had a deeper understanding of topics, rather than focusing on progressing as quickly as possible through a series of levels.
- Teachers reported both positive and negative impacts of AWL on teachers' confidence in making summative judgements of pupils' attainment. Some were confident and felt that their schools' approaches were working well, especially those who had taken part in training and moderation. Others said that the lack of national standards for non-statutory assessment had undermined teachers' confidence in their own judgement.
- Only a minority of interviewees felt that their school's assessment approach worked well for pupils with SEN. Others said that their school's approach did not adequately recognise the small steps of progress made by pupils with SEN. This concern was typically, but not exclusively, mentioned by interviewees from primary schools.

Introduction

This chapter explains how schools have responded to the introduction of AWL, the changes they made to their non-statutory assessment approaches and the reasons for their decisions. It identifies what schools were looking for in their new approaches and the implications for teachers and pupils.

3.1 How did schools respond to AWL?

When AWL was introduced, schools commonly worked back from statutory, end-of-key stage expectations (in the case of primary schools) or the new GCSE requirements (for secondary schools) to construct a set of objectives or expected standards for each year group related to the national curriculum.

A few senior leaders reported that their assessment system was still evolving, or had only recently been finalised after trialling different options. As one primary senior leader explained:

'Our assessment system is not the same system we started with when AWL first came in; it has evolved and has become something that works for us... I feel it has taken this long... to feel like we have really robust data that is meaningful, that we can use to really know where our pupils have come from and are going to. It's been an evolving system and I now feel quite confident that we have a system that works.'

3.1.1 How schools implemented the change

An intention of removing levels was to dispense with the practice of labelling pupils with a numerical level, and this change had been widely adopted. As outlined in chapter 2, interviewees commonly said they had developed a new language to describe assessment outcomes. The change to assessment language was usually implemented across the entire school, established through staff meetings and continuing professional development (CPD). One primary senior leader explained that this was necessary because everyone was using slightly different terms and they were not sure whether they were referring to the same, or different constructs – *'To combat that we all came together as a staff to decide what language we would use.'*

In a few cases, interviewees said that their new system was similar to the old system of levels but using slightly different language. These schools had devised a set of grades that was very similar to the age-related expectations in the former system of levels. These interviewees argued that this was a positive feature of their approach because it provided continuity and avoided adding to teachers' workloads.

3.2 Why did schools adopt their current approach?

Interviewees indicated that on the whole, their schools had spent a great deal of time and effort on finding an approach to assessment after the removal of levels, commonly citing a number of the important considerations outlined below. In order to identify and implement the right approach, interviewees reported spending time on researching assessment systems, mapping assessments to the curriculum, developing their own tests, trialling approaches and training staff to use the new approaches.

3.2.1 The need for a rigorous and robust approach to monitor performance and improve formative feedback

Senior leaders in primary and secondary schools said that they were looking for an approach to assessment that was rigorous and robust. This was often the reason cited by schools for using different assessment methods in combination (teacher assessment combined with external tests and moderation), because they could be triangulated to check consistency. As a primary senior leader explained -

'Really we use [external tests]... to support the teacher assessment judgements that are being made coming out of the classes. The way it works here is teachers will assess... within books and within classroom in a very formative level I suppose. And then we use the summative testing (a) to expose children to how a test feels, and (b) to support the decisions and create numerical information to be able to track children across from KS1 to KS2.'

It was important to schools that their new approach would provide suitable information for accountability purposes, as one primary school senior leader explained – *'The pressure on us is that we need to be showing that our kids are making rapid progress.'*

Despite the argument put forward in the 2015 CAWL report that non-statutory assessment need not be driven by statutory assessment, interviewees felt strongly that the 2 needed to be consistent with one another. Senior leaders emphasised it was important for schools to understand how pupils (and the school as a whole) would be likely to perform in the future. This junior school teacher explained:

'The challenge is to try to find a system, summative and formative, that will match what the national testing regime will throw up in terms of data, whether that is coming to us in year 2 or as they leave in year 6.'

Several secondary school interviewees had created an assessment system for non-statutory assessment aligned to the new 9 to 1 GCSE grading system, as one senior leader explained:

'The first decision that we made was that all of our assessment relating to attainment needs to be using the new [GCSE] numbered grade system and we need to implement that from year 7 right through to year 11. There was no point in having a kind of hybrid system... The second element was that, at all times, we wanted to be able to report to parents and to students the level that their current work is worth relative to GCSE standards.'

Challenges remained for secondary schools in relation to the introduction of new GCSEs. Teachers said they were unsure how closely their assessments related to the new GCSE criteria. This was because they had no past papers or other information to guide them, so they had little to refer to when setting the criteria and standards that they expected pupils to be working towards.

A further important consideration for interviewees when adopting their new approach was to improve the quality and amount of formative feedback provided to pupils – this is described in more detail in chapter 4.

3.2.2 Workload considerations

Senior leaders said that avoiding additional staff workload was an important consideration when developing their new approach. As a secondary teacher explained, the school had decided to avoid spending time on recording assessment data because: *'We have placed a lot more importance on the idea that teachers' verbal communication with the pupils is more valuable.'*

Most interviewees said that after an initial increase in work to identify, develop, implement and refine their school's new assessment system, teachers were now spending a similar amount of time on assessment and recording using their new approach as they had done previously. This is because schools had managed to identify ways to streamline their approaches. For example, one senior leader explained that their secondary school had tried several strategies before finding an approach that both met their aims and was manageable for staff:

'At the beginning when the levels first went we tried [a system with] statements for each year group about what was expected or below. But that didn't work out well, that was quite a lot of workload for teachers and didn't always match up and there was less time spent on moderation and more time spent doing stuff that was kind of unnecessary in some respects. We trialled other statements that another school had recommended... [But] that was also based on statements... so giving children labels. So then we just got rid of everything and for the past two years we've been going with what's expected and that's it, for each year group we made a curriculum so we know exactly how to measure. The assessments are very closely linked to the curriculum.'

A few interviewees said the increase in teacher workload had continued past the initial implementation stage. This was because their new assessment approach required more detailed and nuanced teacher judgements, more frequent reviews of pupil progress, more regular assessment of pupils and/or more frequent recording of assessment results. Interviewees from both primary and secondary schools identified increased assessment workload as a result of the introduction of AWL, though it appeared to be a slightly more prominent issue for interviewees in secondary schools.

Overall, very few senior leaders or teachers identified any reduction in their ongoing assessment workload since the removal of levels. In the isolated cases where this was reported, schools had reduced the amount of recording and/or simplified reporting to parents. Example 3 describes the approach adopted in a secondary school where staff had attempted to reduce the burden on teachers.

Example 3: reduced school-generated reporting

Interviewees in this secondary selective academy say that they have managed to reduce teacher workloads by adopting a simplified assessment system mapping to GCSE standards for all students in years 7 to 11. Students' work is now graded against GCSE grades 9 to 1 approximately once every 10 lessons. According to the teachers we interviewed, removing national curriculum sub levels makes it quicker for them to grade and moderate work – *'As a classroom teacher it takes me 15 minutes to assess the whole class just to translate what I have marked or looked at into their gradings.'*

In order to simplify their annual reporting system and avoid unnecessary repetition, the school also decided to remove teacher comments from their reports to parents. They identified key indicators associated with behaviour for learning and teachers now assess each student using a code for meeting expectation, below expectations or cause of concern. As a result, staff feel the new reporting system provides a more efficient method of communicating with parents.

Four times a year teachers submit a grade for every pupil to the centralised tracking system, which also feeds into the reports for parents. Staff analyse summary data to compare whether a year group is in line with, ahead or behind previous year groups at the same point in time. End-of-year tests are used in most subjects and these form the basis of the final grade at the end of the year. Parents receive formal reports 4 times a year which provide a grade for each subject, a predicted GCSE grade based on current performance and a score for their child's behaviour for learning. However, if a pupil is not making the expected amount of progress, subject teachers communicate with parents in between the formal updates. Pupils also receive more feedback from teachers on their performance in class work, homework and informal end of unit assessments using the same grading system. The grade is accompanied by teacher comments or the teacher may review work as a whole class activity to allow pupils to self-evaluate their work.

According to the headteacher, the ability to maintain a robust approach to assessment whilst reducing the amount of reporting required by staff has been one of the biggest successes:

'Without teachers having to write a lot and without having to explain a lot, the parent can see what the student has got and what they are on track to achieve. I think what we have managed to do is get high levels of communication and information into a low effort system.'

3.2.3 Financial considerations

Although not a commonly mentioned issue, several senior leaders highlighted that cost of changes had influenced their decision-making about their new assessment system. In addition to the staff time involved in implementing new assessment approaches, interviewees in both primary and secondary schools commented that the cost of external products to support assessment can be prohibitive. For example, one teacher from a primary school explained that – *'Schools are finding their way through what works and what doesn't work well, probably spending money on things e.g. [name of product] that we [subsequently] find doesn't do what we want'*.

In a few cases, staff said that they had continued to use a product, even if they were now less convinced of its benefits. This included some 'early adopters' who had made changes to their assessment approach soon after the removal of levels, and who had selected providers when there were fewer to choose from. In such cases they felt that moving to a different product would be expensive, not only because of the cost of replacing the product, but because of the time and effort required to change to a new system.

3.3 What schools say is working well

Interviewees from all schools were able to identify one area of their approach that they felt was working well and a few identified more than one.⁷ However, the information presented in this section is based on self-report, and not all of the practices described in positive terms were equally aligned with the principles of the CAWL report. For example, as mentioned earlier, a few interviewees said that their approaches were similar to the previous system of levels and argued that this was a positive feature as it provided continuity and avoided adding to teachers' workloads. On the other hand, a few

⁷ Note that this should not be interpreted as typical of all schools, given the inclusion of the 'innovative practice' schools and the likelihood that schools with less developed assessment approaches are under-represented in this research.

described the benefits of approaches which entailed very detailed and frequent recording of pupils' progress, though they acknowledged that these changes had increased teachers' workload.

Generally, interviewees commented that their schools' approaches had improved since AWL, in the sense that they were more curriculum-led and effective. As one secondary teacher said '*We were previously not so mindful of assessment, whereas now it's about trying to intertwine subject knowledge and assessment all of the time.*' The main features of schools' non-statutory assessment approaches that interviewees identified as working well were that their approach was simple, consistent and efficient. It informed teaching, provided useful data to track progress, encouraged staff to share good practice and helped schools to communicate with parents. Interviewees in primary schools were more likely to mention collaboration with other schools as a positive feature of their school's approach (see chapter 5 for more details). A few interviewees also mentioned that their system enabled lower-attaining pupils and/or those with SEN to demonstrate progress. (The impact of these features on teachers and pupils is described in detail below and chapter 4 sets out schools' communication with parents).

3.4 The impact of AWL on teachers and pupils

Some teachers said that because their assessment approaches were more in-depth and detailed since AWL, they had a better understanding of the specific gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding. Improvements in their schools' tracking process and analysis of assessment data were helping them to target support and interventions more effectively. One KS1 teacher explained how their school's new approach was providing more precise analysis of pupils' learning needs:

'It's so much better [than using level descriptors]... If you said 'a child isn't strong at writing' then what did that mean really? Whereas, now it's 'This child needs more work on their spelling; this child needs more work on their pronouns.' It's really specific and it means you can target early intervention and I think they are making better progress as a result.'

While interviewees from both secondary and primary schools discussed this type of impact, the beneficial impact of AWL to inform teaching and planning featured more strongly in primary teachers' comments.

A less common, though important, perspective reported by interviewees in both primary and secondary schools was that their school's approach had resulted in pupils having a deeper understanding of topics. This impact was commonly reported by teachers and senior leaders who were using a 'mastery learning' approach. One senior leader of a primary school explained:

'I think the best thing about the removal of levels is that now it very much encourages people to deepen, and have that mastery curriculum, rather than racing through the levels.'

Teachers in these schools said they now provided more opportunities for pupils to assess their own progress and reflect on what they found difficult, what they had done well and what they needed to do to develop their skills. A few interviewees commented that this had resulted in increased teachers' expectations and improved standards.

Interviewees from schools assessing broader aspects of learning (such as cross-cutting skills, attitudes and behaviour) felt that this was helping to increase pupils' wider learning skills, such as independence and self-reflection.

3.5 How has the balance of informal assessment and formal testing changed since AWL?

The most common view from senior leaders and teachers was that the amount of informal assessment in relation to formal testing had remained about the same as before the removal of levels. However, many of the interviewees reported that the focus had changed to providing high-quality formative assessment, as one secondary senior leader explained:

'I would say that the quality of the formative testing has improved. [But] we've still got the expectation on teachers that they need to be testing a certain amount of times per year and they need to be tracking data because it's important to us in the school.'

Indeed, another smaller, group of teachers and senior leaders felt that the balance had shifted in favour of formative assessment, with some reporting that their school had reduced the amount of formal testing. One primary senior leader said:

'Now there are fewer tests but more in-depth assessment going on which is sometimes better because you get to know a lot more about the child than just what's in the test.'

A less common view among both primary and secondary school interviewees was that their school had moved towards a greater emphasis on formal testing. The reason for the change in focus was perceived to be related to a lack of confidence in teacher judgements and feeling the need to provide evidence for accountability purposes, as reflected in the following comments from a primary school senior leader:

'I would say that we now have more testing put in place with the removal of levels if I'm perfectly honest.... I think there is that additional requirement within education to have that supporting evidence really.'

Interviewees from secondary schools tended to link an increase in testing to the changes to GCSEs, rather than AWL, because of the slimmer national curriculum and the lack of past exam papers to use as reference material to enable teachers to judge the attainment of pupils in the year groups leading up to GCSE.

3.6 Has the amount of recording changed?

Most interviewees reported that there had been no change in the amount and frequency of recording of assessment data onto their school's central tracking system as a result of the removal of levels. However, interviewees typically noted that what they were recording, and how they were recording it, was now different. As one primary senior leader explained – *'It's different but not less. The focus [now] is much more on what pupils can and can't do.'*

Of the interviewees who said that there had been a change to the frequency of recording assessment data, the more common view was that recording had increased since the removal of levels. Typically, this related to more frequent uploading of teacher assessment data and/or more detailed information. One explanation provided by a secondary senior leader for the increase was that schools were tracking pupil progress more closely because they felt that they could not easily judge how their pupils were doing in relation to pupils in other schools.

A few interviewees argued that despite the CAWL recommendation, it was worth teachers spending more time recording their assessments because the information was being used to inform teaching. As this year 3 teacher said:

'It's worth it because it really focuses me in on what skills I have to teach and where children have specific gaps I can target that either as a whole class or ask those children specific questions or give them 'prove it' tasks for everybody but I'm actually interested in certain children. It's so much better than what we had before so it's worth that investment [of time].'

A few primary school interviewees said that their school's assessment approach felt like a 'tick-box' exercise. For example, teachers felt they were no longer assessing a piece of writing as a whole but were instead focusing attention on specific elements, such as punctuation.

One of the primary senior leaders speculated that some of the difference in perceptions as to the value of recording formative assessments (which the school's approach required) was related to teachers' level of experience:

'I think my good-to-outstanding teachers would argue that it's [recording and tracking formative assessment] a chore because they knew that information already and they knew that information without having to write it down and record it and therefore got good outcomes for children. Whereas before NQT, people at the beginning of their career, or less effective teachers, I think it's raising their effectiveness. But the balance or the challenge that we've got in school is that those teachers who are strong and good are aggrieved that they've got yet another admin task to do.'

3.7 Confidence in teachers' judgements of pupil performance

Interviewees reported both positive and negative impacts of the removal of levels on teacher confidence. Many interviewees, both teachers and senior leaders, said that AWL had undermined teachers' confidence in assessment judgements. This was mentioned slightly more often by primary interviewees. It was a particular challenge for teachers who were new to the profession or who had recently joined the school.

Teachers commonly said they knew their pupils well and felt able to identify their next steps, but felt less certain in making summative judgements. Interviewees explained that a lack of common national standards for non-statutory assessment had created concerns about whether their interpretations were 'correct' and comparable to those of other teachers. One KS2 teacher provided a typical example of this:

'For me personally it is that feeling of being unsure. Am I assessing them the same way as everyone else? I say that child is at the expected level, but would someone else say they were? It's a lot more postulating..., a lot more feelings of confusion and frustration.'

Some interviewees said they had gradually grown more confident in judging pupils as they became more familiar with their schools' new approaches, and used moderation to ensure greater reliability in their judgements. A few teachers described how the changes to assessment had empowered them to feel more trusted and skilled to make their own judgements of pupils' abilities. One KS2 teacher said:

'I think it's the best thing that has ever happened. I think that teachers became reliant on testing and some of us forgot about assessment, we forgot that we are assessing all the time, and actually we don't need a test... the devil is in the detail... I think it's been a liberation.'

These teachers suggested that because their schools placed greater emphasis on formative assessment this had raised the quality and depth of their understanding of pupil performance in comparison to pupils' performance in external tests. Teachers' confidence in their judgements were aided by training on the new assessment approach, as well as moderation and collaboration with colleagues to refine and ratify interpretations of age-related expectations. Teachers mentioned the importance of close alignment of curriculum and assessment criteria to specify and clarify what pupils needed to demonstrate as the basis for their judgements.

However, some teachers felt that their school did not trust them to determine whether their pupils were meeting age-related expectations without the use of standardised tests. A few teachers were concerned that this lack of trust had led to an increase in formal testing to provide the school with nationally standardised and comparable summative assessments of pupil performance.

In addition, a few interviewees (mainly from primary schools) said they found it challenging to accurately assess higher attainers and help them to develop further. They specifically mentioned the challenge of when to classify a pupil as 'working at greater depth' or showing evidence of 'mastery'.

Recognising the progress of pupils with SEN

When asked how well their school's assessment approach provided useful information on the progress of pupils at all levels of attainment, interviewees from some schools said that it was difficult to acknowledge the progress of pupils with SEN within their school's assessment approach. This response was more common in primary than secondary schools. For example, a primary school teacher said:

'It's difficult to know how to assess them accurately and how to track their progress through school and to show that they are making progress, when actually their progress is so small. It's very difficult.'

A year 2 class teacher explained that they would like to be able to record small steps of progress, such as a pupil being able to put their shoes on, which could represent a big improvement for an individual child.

Only a small minority of interviewees said they felt their school's assessment approaches worked well for these pupils. In these cases, staff had incorporated ways of assessing pupils with SEN into their school's assessment systems or developed additional methods of recording their attainment, for example by having a separate set of categories, or using their tracking system to be able to clearly identify these pupils and put interventions in place. Aspects of practice they highlighted included early intervention (including using diagnostic tests to identify specific needs), adopting a separate 'small steps' approach for

children with SEN and entering 'provision maps' into the school's tracking system to keep a record of the interventions individuals had received. Example 4 describes the approach to assessment adopted in one of these schools.

Example 4: assessing pupils with SEN

In devising their new approach to assessment, the philosophy of this primary maintained school was to put assessment at the heart of children's education. As the deputy head teacher explained *'We wanted children to have ownership of their learning which was unique to them.'*

Each child has their own bespoke bookmark for reading, writing and maths. The bookmarks have 8 sections with accompanying learning statements in each. Once a child has grasped the knowledge or skill described by a particular statement, the teacher adds a date to the bookmark. Once a child has consolidated the knowledge or skill, that statement is highlighted on their bookmark using a colour coded system. The children look after their own bookmarks and take them home once a week to show to their parents.

Pupils with SEN have the same bookmarks but the new system enables them to be personalised for each child according to their needs. Some children have a bookmark for their particular year group but are actually working below that level. Teachers then add a subtle identifier (in the form of a star) in order to represent how many years below a child is working. According to our interviewees, the main benefit of this approach is that it allows teachers to select criteria for assessment that are appropriate for each individual. As the deputy head explained *'If we have a year 4 pupil with SEN, they will still have a year 4 bookmark, but most of their statements may be coming from year 2. We put two stars on their bookmark to show that they're working at a different year.'*

Assessment data for pupils with SEN is entered into tracking grids in order to monitor and demonstrate progress. Teachers find that the new approach reduces some of the challenges that pupils with SEN previously faced when they were given levels significantly below their peers. As a year 6 teacher explained *'Because everyone has their own bookmark, there isn't that stigma of "I'm a 2a."*

4. Communication with pupils and parents

Key findings

- Schools used a variety of methods to communicate assessment information to pupils. Some interviewees reported a positive impact on pupils' understanding of what they needed to do in order to make progress. This was particularly the case in schools which encouraged pupils to set their own learning objectives.
- Generally, interviewees felt that the shift to providing pupils with more detailed feedback was helping to reduce the 'labelling' effect of levels. However, some teachers felt that because their school's grading system was too broad, shallow or poorly defined, this could lead pupils to feel confused or demotivated.
- Interviewees reported opposing impacts of their assessment approach on communication with parents. Some found that parents welcomed the more descriptive information, whereas others said that parents had understood the previous system of levels and did not currently understand their new approach.

Introduction

This chapter outlines how schools communicate with pupils and parents about assessment, and how this has been affected by the removal of levels. It also summarises interviewees' perceptions of how pupils and parents have responded to this change.

4.1 Communication with pupils

Interviewees said that their assessment approaches were designed to '*increase pupils' ownership of their learning*' by involving pupils in discussions about their performance, target setting and reflection. Teachers described how both their oral and written feedback focused on what pupils had done well and the next steps for development. Teachers said they now shared learning objectives explicitly with pupils, so that they were better informed about the specific aspect of performance they needed to work on.

Primary teachers reported sharing objectives with pupils from KS2 onwards, as pupils' understanding increased. They communicated the information in different ways, most commonly by writing in pupils' exercise books, on a card or bookmark, or less commonly on the board or wall in the classroom. As one year 5 teacher explained 'It's a visual clue for the children so they can see exactly where they are and their targets for the end of the year.' Most commonly, personal targets were related to the statements or objectives that the teacher shared with the class and which could be ticked off once they were achieved.

In some schools, especially those using a mastery learning approach, teachers encouraged pupils to set their own individual learning objectives in response to feedback from teachers or peers. Interviewees said that this had helped pupils to have a deeper understanding of what they needed to do next to improve. Teachers in secondary schools in particular highlighted the positive impact of the changes on pupils' understanding of their performance. A senior leader from a secondary school explained the positive effect on pupils:

'I would say that the formative feedback is working well, because when we look at exercise books and we look at students' work, we see that they're getting really good quality feedback, really good quality next steps and students are able to act upon those, I would say that's having a really positive impact.'

Teachers commonly described providing pupils in key stages 2 and 3 with summative feedback in the form of a 'score' accompanied by feedback on their performance in relation to their targets. For example, a head of department in a secondary school explained how their school provided pupils with written feedback at 4 assessment points during the school year:

'[The summative assessment report] gives them [pupils] written feedback on what they have done well, which is very important; they need to feel that sense of achievement. We give them some criticism of what they could do to improve – constructive criticism of course, as positive as we can. And then what the students will do is look through that and they will set themselves some targets – three things that they might do to improve performance or increase their level next time. And then we will read that, check it... and it goes into a folder which is held at the school... So at the next assessment, that can come out again, and they can compare it to their last target, and make a comment about whether they've achieved those targets.'

Generally, interviewees felt that the shift to more detailed feedback was helping to reduce the 'labelling' effect of levels. Interviewees commented that previously, by just being given a level, lower-attaining pupils could be demoralised, which could have a negative impact on their attitude to learning. Conversely, pupils attaining a high level may become complacent and were not always challenged to develop further.

However, some interviewees had a contrasting perspective. They said that the removal of levels had made it less clear to pupils how they were progressing. They pointed out that the previous system had provided an overarching system whereby pupils were expected to work their way through the levels as they moved through the education system. However, since the introduction of AWL, viewing progress across year groups had become more challenging because their school systems required teachers to judge

pupils relative to the expected standard for their age (so the expected standard was effectively re-set at the beginning of each year). This issue was particularly raised in schools that had adopted 3 or 4 overarching categories of performance, or where categories were poorly defined by vague and insufficiently distinctive statements, as a primary senior leader explained:

'It is quite generic – above, below or expected. You could have a child who is very, very "below" who is [in the same category as] as a child who is only just slightly 'below'.'

Interviewees said this could result in pupils being told they were meeting the criteria of the category 'emerging' throughout the school year and therefore not feel they had made any progress.

Less commonly, interviewees also suggested that their new assessment approach of assigning categories, rather than levels, had the same detrimental 'labelling' effect on pupils. A few interviewees said that whereas levels had used a 'best fit' approach to identifying pupil's attainment, the school had chosen to mirror the statutory teacher assessment focus on 'secure fit'. Previously, for example, a pupil with an engaging writing style but poor spelling could still be judged to be working at the expected level. For schools that chose to use a 'secure fit' approach, this meant that pupils must demonstrate their ability to fulfil all criteria to be considered to be working at the expected level. Some teachers said that this approach could lead to pupils becoming demotivated when they were told their outcomes.

4.2 Communication with parents

Interviewees reported opposing impacts of AWL on their communication with parents, with a similar proportion reporting positive and negative impacts.

Interviewees commonly said that they communicated assessment information to parents through 'traditional' mechanisms of written reports and parents' evenings, and that this had not changed since AWL. What had changed was the type of information schools provided. Interviewees explained that they were typically providing parents with more descriptive feedback including what their child was doing well, gaps in their knowledge, skills or understanding and what their child needed to work on next. Similar to the information provided to pupils, parents were given information about the targets or objectives set, and feedback in terms of their child's performance using the school's assessment categories. Some teachers and senior leaders felt that their communication with parents had improved as a result. As one primary senior leader said:

'I think parents prefer it [the new system] because it is clearer... Parents just like to know straight up where the child is up to, whether they are on track, behind or above.'

Some senior leaders said that their school had provided support and information to parents when they changed to AWL, to help them understand their new assessment categories and the new type of feedback. This had included letters, information sheets and seminars or workshops to explain the change.

A few interviewees highlighted their communication with parents as an aspect of their assessment approach that was working particularly well. These schools had taken action to clarify their reporting and ensure that parents understood the information about their child's attainment. Interviewees said that the information they provided was more informative and provided more comprehensive information than levels, but in a concise way. In contrast to the secondary academy in Example 3 above, many primary schools did not report to parents on a numerical value, as they had done previously using levels, but rather reported the category of attainment, along with commentary on different subject areas and areas for development. Often approaches adopted by primary schools did equate categories to a numerical value, but this tended to be for internal tracking purposes only. Example 5 describes one school's approach to engaging with parents.

Example 5: improved communication with parents

Staff at this large maintained primary school had found it challenging to engage parents in their child's education. Prior to the removal of levels, staff identified a need to work with parents to explain the upcoming changes and the details of their new approach. They wrote to parents using plain language to describe their new assessment model.

Parents receive reports called 'progress maps' 3 times a year in the autumn, spring and summer terms. The system uses emoji faces to summarise each student's attainment and progress in core subjects. The progress maps also include individual targets for each subject and tips on how parents can support their children's education outside of school. Describing their approach, a year 4 teacher explained *'Our reporting starts off on the basis of 'is your child at, above or below expected'. Parents understand this clearly. If the children are below, we still frame it in a positive way and explain [that] 'your child is below the expected at the moment, so we're doing this, this and this to help your child'.'*

Parents are also invited into school for face-to-face progress meetings so that teachers can explain anything parents do not understand in the progress reports. In order to encourage parents to attend, the school offers whole-day informal 'drop-ins' to provide increased flexibility. Staff report that these sessions have increased parental engagement – attendance at the 'drop-ins' has been good, with an average of 20 parents attending from a class of 30 pupils.

In contrast, several interviewees said that parents had understood the previous system of levels but were struggling to understand the school's new approach. In these cases, interviewees said they had found it difficult to explain the new assessment system and language to the parents. Some also reported a negative response from parents to AWL, as illustrated by the following comment from a primary senior leader:

'Feedback from parents has been interesting. They hate the new system. We worked really hard with the parents on the levels, and the parents understood the levels because they could see the progression.'

Similarly, interviewees in one primary school said that the introduction of their new system had caused friction because parents did not like to hear that their child 'had not met the expected standard'.

Parents were also reported to find it confusing to receive judgements from different schools using different criteria, for instance when their child transferred to another school, or because they had children attending different schools using different approaches.

5. Schools' use of information and support

Key findings

- Interviewees had commonly drawn on published information and taken part in training when AWL was first introduced.
- Schools were usually involved in collaboration with other schools, initially to discuss the merits of different assessment approaches and subsequently to provide ongoing information and moderation (especially among primary schools).
- Interviewees said that they did not feel the need for any further support on AWL, apart from annotated examples of students' work representing different categories of achievement in relation to national standards (requested by a substantial minority of interviewees). There was also some demand for 'good' examples of schools' approaches to assessment.
- Generally, interviewees said that the best way to share good practice on non-statutory assessment was through collaboration with other schools and/or online resources.

Introduction

This chapter summarises the main forms of support on AWL accessed by teachers and senior leaders and any further support needs they identified. It also outlines interviewees' ideas on the best ways to share good practice on non-statutory assessment.

5.1 Range and types of support accessed on AWL

5.1.1 Access to published information and guidance

We asked interviewees if they had accessed any published information or guidance on AWL. Commonly, interviewees said they had drawn on some information or guidance; however, some said they had not done so (for reasons explained below).

The most commonly mentioned form of guidance was government documents accessed from DfE's website. Some interviewees (especially senior leaders) mentioned the 2015 CAWL report by name. The general view was that these documents had helped schools to understand the principles behind the policy change. A few senior leaders described undertaking substantial independent reading and research around the general topic of AWL.

Interviewees who said they had not accessed any published information or guidance on AWL typically said that this was because there wasn't very much official information available. In particular, senior leaders tended to say that the information that was available was not detailed enough to help them make their changes. According to a secondary senior leader *'We found, at the time when we first started in 2014, there was not a lot of information out there... So we felt very much on our own.'* Many senior leaders said that they preferred to consult members of their staff or work with other schools to design their own approach to assessment, rather than drawing on published guidance. Meanwhile, teachers commonly said they had not accessed any guidance because senior leaders accessed it and filtered the information down.

5.1.2 Training on AWL

Generally, interviewees said they had received some training during the changes to the system, but few reported taking part in any ongoing training on AWL. Some interviewees had not received any training on AWL (for reasons explained below).

The training received by interviewees during the introduction of AWL was most commonly organised by the school and took the form of staff meetings to discuss the changes and INSET days led by senior leaders or staff responsible for assessment. The content of the training tended to focus on understanding their school's new approach to assessment and why that approach had been chosen. Some interviewees also received internal training on how to use their school's new tracking systems. According to a primary teacher, the most useful aspect of training was *'looking at what an "expected" looked like in each classroom against the national curriculum.'*

Some interviewees had attended external training or conferences on AWL, most commonly run by the local authority, or companies providing tracking systems. The external events were typically attended by senior or middle leaders, such as year group or subject leaders. Interviewees commonly found this helpful, as one primary KS1 leader explained *'The LA training was really, really useful. It's always reassuring to get that guidance from the school improvement partners and moderators.'*

Interviewees who said that they had not received any external training on AWL were typically classroom teachers working in schools in which only selected staff had attended. A primary teacher explained: *'I haven't been on any external training but information has been cascaded down from SLT in the form of staff meetings.'*

Senior leaders from schools which had not taken part in training tended to be from schools whose assessment systems had not changed significantly as a result of the introduction AWL. For example, a secondary senior leader explained that they had not provided any training because *'teachers are not doing anything different'*.

5.2 Collaboration on AWL

Interviewees typically said their school was involved in some form of collaboration with other schools on assessment, initially to discuss the merits of different approaches and subsequently to provide ongoing information and moderation.

Many schools taking part in this research were part of school networks, partnerships or trusts which provide support on assessment. Interviewees referred to collaboration within school partnerships and MATs. Some teachers said they had taken part in collaboration specific to particular year groups or subjects, with primary interviewees mentioning collaborating on the assessment of writing in particular. In some cases interviewees mentioned the benefit of being able to share information with other schools that use the same commercial tracking system nationally via conferences, online forums and web seminars. For example, one primary teacher attended a national conference organised by the tracking system provider, which was attended by 400 primary schools.

A few senior leaders explained how they had initially discussed AWL with senior leaders from other schools to try to come to a 'shared understanding'. For example, senior leaders said they had visited other schools to see approaches to assessment in practice and invited schools to visit them. Generally, interviewees said sharing practice with other schools was very useful. As a secondary teacher remarked *'It's useful to share our practice and get them [other schools] to critique what we're doing.'* Most interviewees said their school was willing to share their practice, but some commented that other schools were not so willing to collaborate with them.

The most common form of ongoing collaboration, especially in primary schools, was to moderate pieces of work with others to ensure that schools were making consistent judgements. One primary teacher involved in moderation within their MAT explained its benefits *'It [moderation] builds a network that helps build reassurance so that you can see it from a slightly bigger picture.'*

One school's approach to collaboration is described in Example 6.

Example 6: sharing practice, training and moderation

A maintained primary school worked collaboratively with 3 other local primary schools to develop their assessment system. The deputy headteacher described the benefits of this in the early stages of the change to AWL, when some schools felt unclear about what approach to take *'We thrashed out the best ways to go about it rather than try to sort it out ourselves.'*

Senior leaders and subject leads from the 4 schools met regularly to share ideas. They also drew on information, support and guidance provided by the local authority. The

approach is broadly the same across all 4 schools, though they have not all adopted the same category descriptions. The 4 schools have also jointly invested in the same externally produced tracking system for assessment and attended joint training on how to use the system.

Interviewees said their approach to moderation was working well. Staff from all 4 schools meet 3 times a year in their year groups to share their judgements in maths, reading and science. They compare the grades that teachers have awarded to pieces of work and validate one another's judgements. Other local schools have also attended these moderation sessions in order to share practice more widely. The year 2 teacher particularly valued the wider benefits and opportunities of working together with other schools *'We also share good practice and share what we like and what we don't like. We do a lot of sharing through professional discussion and [we] share resources.'*

Some interviewees said their school had collaborated with others to improve the transition between primary and secondary school. Primary interviewees talked about working with other local primary schools with the aim of creating consistency in their approaches to assessment in order to make it easier for pupils when they moved to secondary schools. A primary teacher said that each year, local year 6 teachers meet for a 'transition continuity conference' to encourage common ways of presenting non-statutory assessment data when children move to secondary school. Similarly, a few secondary interviewees mentioned contacting 'feeder' primary schools to discuss their assessment approaches. A secondary RE teacher explained *'We have met with the RE lead from the feeder primary schools to try to get consistency in the way the pupils are assessed. We found it useful to understand what the primary schools expected the pupils to do.'* Interviewees who said they had not been involved in collaboration with other schools explained that this was either because of a lack of opportunities, or cited time constraints and funding shortages.

5.3 Gauging the demand for further information and guidance

Generally interviewees said they did not want any further information, guidance or training on AWL, other than exemplar materials. The 2015 CAWL report recommended establishing a national item bank of questions based on national curriculum content to support formative assessment in schools, but this was not requested by any interviewees.⁸

The most common reason given for not needing further support was that interviewees wanted a period of stability to embed the changes that they had made. Typical of this

⁸ Note that we did not ask specifically for interviewees' views about an item bank.

view was a primary teacher who said *'It works well here and I think we all know what we are doing with it.'* A minority went on to say that they thought further 'official' information could even do more harm than good, as it could cause confusion. According to one primary senior leader *'I think there's actually a need for less intervention and less involvement as far as schools are concerned. I think in essence we should be left to get on with the job that we are tasked to do.'* A few interviewees expressed the view that even if guidance were to be produced, it would be unlikely to be suitable for everyone, due to the variety of approaches to assessment that schools have implemented in response to the removal of levels.

While interviewees did not feel the need for general information, guidance or training on non-statutory assessment, a substantial minority of interviewees said they would be interested in *'examples of what age expectations look like.'* One of the sources of difference between schools was that teachers may be judging pupils' attainment in relation to expectations for pupils at different points in the year (for example, comparing pupils with expectations for the current school term, as opposed to expectations by the end of the academic year). This had led to confusion between schools when using similar descriptors to refer to similar criteria but judged using different standards. The use of different approaches and confusion over assessment language was a particular challenge when schools engaged in cross-school moderation. Interviewees in both primary and secondary schools noted the lack of consistency between schools about what is meant by descriptions such as 'at the expected standard', 'secure' or 'greater depth'. Teachers in primary schools were especially concerned about the use of different assessment terminology in other schools, though this was not a problem where schools were using a common approach (for example, across schools in the same MAT).

Interviewees said they would find it useful to see annotated examples of pupils' work that are 'below', 'at' and 'above' age-related expectations, for year groups and in subjects that are not part of statutory assessment. A primary school teacher explained why schools would find this so valuable:

'[A key challenge is] teacher confidence to say definitely this child is 'secure'. And just having something concrete to measure against. The statements aren't always that clear from the national curriculum objectives. It would be great if there were exemplars for a 'secure' child.'

Interviewees in primary schools said they were clear about the expected standard at the end of year 2 and 6, but would like guidance on assessing other year groups. Similarly, interviewees in secondary schools said they would welcome such examples to clarify whether their pupils are working at the expected standard and on track to achieve the required standard for GCSE (and A-Level). One secondary senior leader explained this as follows:

'The biggest challenge we face at the moment is the lack of good quality comparative exemplar material for GCSE and at A-Level. We are going anywhere we can to get exemplar material to build the bank. When we are grading and particularly if we want to be indicating what the current standard is and we want to be indicating if pupils are on for a 7 or an 8, we need to know what those [grades] mean.'

A few interviewees specifically said that developing a 'common language' of assessment would be useful, as it would make it easier for schools to compare their judgements of pupils' attainment and progress.

In addition to exemplars of pupils' work at different standards, interviewees commonly said they would be interested to know more about what other schools are doing. One primary senior leader posed the question *'Nationally, could we do with something that kind of gives us a bit more of a picture of the whole system? Well, yes, I think we probably could.'* A few interviewees said they would like to be able to access case studies of schools with 'good assessment systems'.

5.4 The best ways to share good practice

Interviewees commonly said that in their view, the best way to share good practice on assessment is through working directly with other schools. They felt this should be in the form of school networks or partnerships and take the form of school visits or discussions with other schools. Generally, interviewees said these were great ways to share ideas, resources and find out about tracking systems. A primary teacher said *'Our school is very, very passionate about being connected with schools that are around us. There's a lot to be learnt from us but also there's a lot to be learnt from them.'* Interviewees said they particularly liked visiting other schools because it allowed them to see different approaches to assessment in action. A primary teacher explained *'I think it is easier to share and compare methods in a conversation where you are just two teachers showing what you do, bouncing ideas off each other, seeing what works best.'*

Some interviewees said it would also be helpful to share good practice through websites and online forums. These interviewees thought it would be helpful to access a website containing case studies of different approaches to assessment and examples of good practice. As a secondary leader described it, this would be *'some kind of website or portal with video explanations to talk you through an approach, along with some supporting documentation.'* A few interviewees advocated social media as a good way to share practice and engage in conversation with other teachers.

A few interviewees said that training sessions and conferences are the best way to share good practice. In their view, the government or local authorities should provide training

for all senior leaders on AWL so that senior leaders are able to disseminate this information to other teachers in their schools.

6. Discussion and conclusion

6.1 Discussion

Assessment is an important area of educational policy and the move away from levels after nearly 30 years has challenged schools to develop their own systems of non-statutory assessment.

All participating schools had moved away from levels and all interviewees were able to identify at least one aspect of their current approach that was working well (though note that our sample may under-represent the views of schools which were less confident in their approaches).

The research revealed that schools were using a wide range of non-statutory approaches. However, the main yardstick to measure progress was statutory assessment (albeit related to curriculum content). Schools were working out which concepts, skills and knowledge pupils needed to demonstrate by the end of each year in order to achieve the expected standard in statutory assessments at end of their current key stage. Primary, and to some extent secondary schools, were focusing particular attention on subjects and skills that are included in statutory assessment, and less on curriculum areas and skills that are not.

A few schools said their approaches were similar to the system before levels, but most had made substantial changes and some of their approaches were radically different. Schools' new non-statutory assessment systems commonly comprised formative and summative assessment together with a tracking system. Primary schools were more likely to moderate teacher assessments with other schools and to use externally produced tests. Secondary schools were more likely to have developed their own summative assessments. Unlike primary schools, they were less likely to use moderation for non-statutory assessment, and those that did so tended to moderate within the school.

Most interviewees felt that their current approach to non-statutory assessment offered some improvements to the previous system under levels. In line with the CAWL recommendations, schools said their new assessment approaches were much more strongly focused on formative assessment and they felt this had resulted in a number of positive impacts for pupils, including better alignment of teaching to meet pupils' needs, improved communication and a clearer focus on the next steps for each individual pupil. However, some interviewees felt that their school's approach did not adequately capture the progress of pupils with SEN.

The change to AWL had entailed considerable work as schools devised and implemented their new approaches, which was intensified by concurrent and subsequent

changes to curriculum and assessment. After the initial implementation phase, schools reported that the assessment workload was similar to that under the previous system of levels, although some teachers were continuing to experience higher workloads due to the demands of their schools' assessment approaches.

Other challenges were related to the removal of a national system for statutory assessment (levels) which schools had previously used as a 'common currency' when considering the attainment and progress of pupils more generally. Schools differed in their use of assessment categories, the number of categories, how these were labelled and how they were applied. This has led to a number of challenges stemming from the fact that schools are judging their pupils' attainment according to different criteria, in relation to different time points and using different language, all of which was reported to have created confusion among teachers, between schools, and to some extent among parents.

6.2 Conclusion

The stated intention of the removal of levels was to contribute to greater coherence between the assessment system and the curriculum to promote greater breadth of content and depth of learning (CAWL, 2015, p.3). In order to achieve this, the commission proposed that schools should focus more on formative assessment based on high-quality, in-depth teaching, and less on the requirements of the statutory national assessment framework and testing regime.

Interviewees said that the removal of levels led their schools to re-focus on formative assessment and interviewees attested to the positive impact of this on teachers and pupils. On the whole, interviewees indicated that the quality of feedback and communication with pupils had improved. However, the removal of national curriculum levels and the encouragement for schools to develop their own approaches have led to a perceived lack of common understanding between schools. The influence of high-stakes national assessment is still clearly apparent in schools' non-statutory assessment and continues to be the main driver for formative and summative assessment.

Schools had typically accessed a range of guidance, support and training when devising their new approaches to non-statutory assessment, but few had continued to do so once their approaches were established. There were examples of continuing school-to-school collaboration on non-statutory assessment, especially for moderation (largely among primary schools) and less commonly, for information-sharing and in order to ease transition.

6.3 Next steps

A longer-term objective of this research was to enable DfE to share examples of effective practice in schools and to help develop further guidance and support for schools. While schools commonly did not want further information or guidance, this research has identified some issues that the department may wish to consider.

The 2015 CAWL report recommended the establishment of a national item bank of assessment questions to be used for formative and summative assessment, together with a dedicated online forum for teachers to share their ideas on assessment. This research suggested that schools would welcome a form of national standardisation for non-statutory assessment guided by annotated exemplars of pupils' work rather than an item bank of questions, and there would be potential interest in an online forum together with access to case studies of schools' assessment approaches. The research also endorsed the need to address the issue of how best to recognise pupils' progress, especially for pupils with SEN.

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Appendix: further information on ethics and sampling

The appendix explains the ethical considerations made by the research team when carrying out the research. The tables present the characteristics of the participating schools and interviewees, as well as participants' responses to the screening question.

A1 Ethical considerations

The research team carefully considered the possibility of any ethical issues affecting the study. We were mindful that school staff were taking part on a voluntary basis, and avoided putting them under undue pressure to participate. We considered the pressures on teachers and their busy schedules by offering to conduct interviews at a time to suit participants, including evenings and weekends. All interviewees were offered a small incentive for completing the interview of £10 in the form of a voucher or a donation to charity.

Before each interview began, we informed the participants of the purpose of the research and our interest in a wide range of perspectives and views. We informed participants that neither themselves, nor their school, would be identified in any of the reports produced from the research. Interviews were audio-recorded, with permission in order to ensure the accuracy of quotations. The team undertook to inform the research participants when the research is published and send them a link to the report.

All details of sampling, school contacts and interview notes were identified by number, rather than by name and held in password-protected electronic files. NFER did not identify any participating schools or individuals to anyone outside the research team.

As NFER produces its own assessment products, the research team identified a potential conflict of interest which could arise if commercially valuable information provided by participating schools were to be shared with colleagues responsible for devising or marketing these products. To guard against this risk, the interviews were conducted by researchers who were not part of the NFER's assessment centre. All interview notes were kept in a protected area of NFER's IT system which was inaccessible to other members of staff outside the research team.

A2 Characteristics of participating schools

A total of 42 schools took part in the research. Thirty-two schools were part of the NFER teacher voice sample and 10 schools were part of the 'innovative practice' sample.

The sample was designed to represent a range of different school types, location and pupil characteristics. Senior leaders who gave a reason for declining the invitation to

participate commonly said this was because they did not feel confident in their school's assessment approach. The following tables provide information about the achieved sample in terms of governance and type, regional location, Ofsted inspection judgements, attainment band, proportion of pupils eligible for FSM and the percentage of pupils with EAL.

The research focused on publicly-funded primary and secondary schools. Independent schools, special schools and pupil referral units were not included in the research.

Table 1 Sector of participating schools

	Primary	Secondary	Grand total
Infant	1	0	1
Infant and Junior (Primary)	24	0	24
Junior	2	0	2
Middle deemed Secondary	0	1	1
Comprehensive to 16	0	2	2
Comprehensive to 18	0	8	8
Grammar	0	2	2
Secondary Modern	0	2	2
Grand Total	27	15	42

Source: NFER Register of schools (ROS)

Table 1 shows that there were a range of school types in the sample, with the majority of primary-sector schools being combined infant and junior and the majority of secondary schools being comprehensive and taking pupils up to the age of 18.

One of the school characteristics of interest was the governance type. The number of free schools and academies England is rising, particularly in the secondary sector. In 2017, approximately 71% of secondary schools in England were academies or free schools, whereas 33% of primary schools were academies or free schools (Edubase, 2017). The governance of participating schools is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Governance type of participating schools

	Primary	Secondary	Grand total
Free schools and stand-alone academies	1	6	7
Academies that are part of a MAT	6	6	12
Maintained schools	20	3	23
Grand Total	27	15	42

Source: NFER Register of schools (ROS)

Table 2 shows that, in line with national trends, the majority of secondary schools were free schools/stand-alone academies, or academies within a MAT. The majority of primary schools in the sample were maintained schools.

The achieved sample included schools located in all regions of England, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Region of participating schools

Regions	Primary	Secondary	Grand total
East Midlands	3	2	5
Eastern	6	3	9
London	3	0	3
North East	1	0	1
North West/Merseyside	2	3	5
South East	7	1	8
South West	2	2	4
West Midlands	2	3	5
Yorkshire & The Humber	1	1	2
Grand total	27	15	42

Source: NFER Register of schools (ROS)

The Opportunity Areas programme was introduced in October 2016 with the aim of increasing social mobility. Twelve local authority districts with low levels of social mobility across the country were selected to be opportunity areas (DfE, 2017c). In 2017,

approximately 4.3% of all state-funded, non-selective primary and secondary schools in England were in opportunity areas⁹.

Table 4 Whether participating schools are located in opportunity areas

	Primary	Secondary	Grand total
Not in opportunity area	25	15	40
In opportunity area	2	0	2
Grand Total	27	15	42

Source: NFER Register of schools (ROS)

The table shows that a small number of schools in the sample are in opportunity areas – this is in proportion to the national population.

In March 2017, 89% of schools were rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding and 11% were rated as inadequate or requiring improvement (Ofsted, 2017). The proportion of participating schools in each Ofsted category within the sample is shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Results of latest Ofsted inspection of participating schools

	Primary	Secondary	Grand total
Good/Outstanding	26	13	39
Inadequate/Requires improvement	1	2	3
Grand Total	27	15	42

Source: NFER Register of schools (ROS)

The table shows that, in line with the national trend there were many more schools rated as good or outstanding in the sample than those rated as inadequate or requires improvement. Schools rated as inadequate and requires improvement are slightly underrepresented in the achieved sample (around nine per cent, compared with 11% nationally).

School attainment was categorised by dividing the national distribution of scores on national curriculum assessments into three groups – bottom 25%, middle 50% and top 25%. The performance of schools participating in the research is shown in Table 6.

⁹ Based on analysis using the [Schools in England Data set](#).

Table 6 School attainment of participating schools

	Primary	Secondary	Grand total
Bottom 25%	11	3	14
Middle 50%	8	8	16
Top 25%	7	3	10
Assessment data not available	1	1	2
Grand Total	27	15	42

Source: NFER Register of schools (ROS)

The table shows that the majority of schools participating in the research had attainment results within the middle 50% of schools nationally. Slightly more of the schools were in the bottom 25% attainment band than the top. Two schools (one infant and one middle deemed secondary) had no attainment data available for comparison.

Table 7 shows the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) in each school, representing the national distribution divided into five equal groups.

Table 7 Proportion of pupils eligible for FSM in participating schools

	Primary	Secondary	Grand total
Highest 20%	2	1	3
2nd highest 20%	2	5	7
Middle 20%	9	3	12
2nd lowest 20%	10	4	14
Lowest 20%	4	2	6
Grand Total	27	15	42

Source: NFER Register of schools (ROS)

The table shows that the majority of schools in the sample are amongst the middle or second lowest 20% of schools nationally in terms of their proportion of pupils eligible for FSM. Only a small proportion of schools in the sample are amongst schools with the highest proportions of FSM pupils nationally.

English as an additional language (EAL) is a term given to pupils who are exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English. In 2017, 20.6% of pupils in primary schools and 16.2% of pupils in secondary schools were recorded as having EAL (DfE, 2017d). Table 8 shows the distribution of pupils with EAL in participating schools.

Table 8 Proportion of pupils with EAL in participating schools

	Primary	Secondary	Grand total
None	5	0	5
1 - 5%	8	6	14
6 - 49%	13	8	21
50% +	1	1	2
Grand Total	27	15	42

Source: NFER Register of schools (ROS)

The table shows that just under half of primary and secondary schools in the sample had less than 5% of pupils with EAL, which is considerably lower than the national average.

A3 Characteristics of interviewees

The research team set out to interview 3 individuals from each school, comprising one senior leader and 2 classroom teachers. In order to select classroom teachers, the senior leader from each school was asked to provide the details of 4 teachers in different roles – teachers of key stages 1 and 2 in primary schools¹⁰ and teachers of core and non-core subjects in secondary schools. The research team then selected 2 teachers from each school (one from each category) for interview. Table 9 shows the distribution of interviews by interviewee role.

Table 9 Role of Interviewees

	Primary	Secondary	Grand Total
Senior Leader	27	15	42
Classroom teacher	49	27	76
Grand Total	76	42	118

Source: Respondents answer to NFER interview question

Three interviews were conducted in 35 of the 42 schools in the sample. Two interviews took place in 6 of the schools and one interview (with a senior leader) took place in one secondary school.

Table 10 shows the achieved sample of teachers by key stage.

¹⁰ Note that not all primary sector schools had pupils in both key stages.

Table 10 Number of teachers per key stage

Key Stage	Grand Total
KS1	18
KS2	30
Both KS1 & KS2	1
KS3	27
Grand Total	76

Source: Respondents answer to NFER interview question

The table shows that the research included fewer teachers of key stage 1 than of key stages 2 or 3. One teacher taught pupils in both key stages 1 and 2.

A3.1 Secondary teachers per subject area

At secondary level, roughly half of the teachers interviewed taught the core subjects of maths, English and science. The other half taught non-core subjects, including humanities, modern foreign languages, design and technology, religious education and performing arts.

A4 Screening question on assessment practices

NFER posed a screening question to the senior leaders in the teacher voice sample. The purpose of this question was to find out some brief information about schools' approaches to non-statutory assessment for sampling purposes (with the aim of including schools with a range of assessment practices). Senior leaders were invited to say which of 12 possible aspects of assessment practice had been adopted in their schools since the removal of levels. Table 11 shows responses to the question from the 32 senior leaders in the teacher voice sample who participated in the research.

Table 11 Schools' non-statutory assessment practices

Frequencies of responses to the screening question (teacher voice/panel sample only)	Total primary	Total secondary	Total (all schools)
Commercial tracking system or assessment data recording system.	18	2	20
Internally produced tracking system or assessment data recording system.	10	11	21
LA recommended assessment system/approach.	2	0	2
MAT recommended assessment system/approach.	2	2	4
Commercial tests in one or more subjects.	17	3	20
Internally produced tests/assessments.	5	8	13
Mastery learning approach.	11	2	13
Comparative judgment products/tools.	4	3	7
Assessment partnership(s) with other schools (e.g. for moderation).	18	3	21
Assessment training for senior leaders.	14	2	16
Training in questioning techniques for classroom teachers.	9	2	11
Training in marking/feedback techniques for classroom teachers.	17	5	22
Other distinctive feature of your school's assessment practice (please specify)	3	1	4
None of the above	0	1	1
Total number of respondents	20	12	32

More than one answer could be given
 Source: NFER teacher voice screening question

The table shows that the most popular non-statutory assessment practices adopted within these schools since the removal of levels were tracking/data recording systems (both commercial and internally devised), commercial tests, partnerships with other schools (for moderation) and training in marking/feedback techniques for classroom teachers.



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